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BY  
FRANK  
BARRETT

Entered at the Post Office, N. Y., as second-class matter. Copyright, 1894, by JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY. Issued Tri-Weekly.  
Annual Subscription, \$30.00. July 2, 1897.



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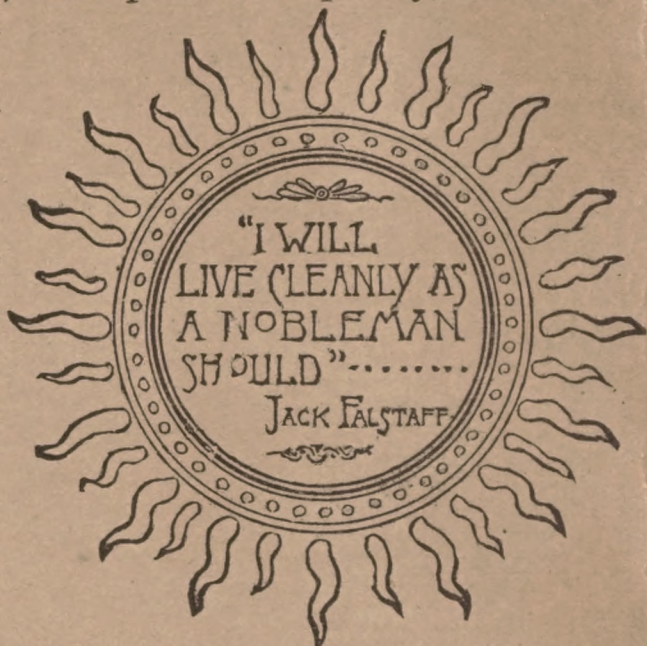
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*Bernard Thorne*

# THE GREAT HESPER.

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## CHAPTER I.

WE landed at Southampton, September 14, 1885, and a ragged crew we were.

The "Judge," Joe Brace, led the way—a great, gaunt man, with long, long legs, a stoop in his shoulders, and a swaying movement of his body and arms when he walked, as if he had a load on his back and a long way to go; a man with a black fell on the back of his hands, a dark beard growing high upon his cheek-bones, and a great bush of iron-gray hair sticking out all round his head, and a forelock hanging down over his eye. One could see nothing of his features but a long red nose and deep-set, beady black eyes. His fustian jacket was worn to rags at the elbows—and so was mine, as for that—split in the seams between the shoulders with the constant strain of the laboring arms. Once upon a time his top-boots had been black, but now they were all the same yellow clay color with the trousers that were tucked into them, and just as badly in need of repair.

I followed with Van Hoeck. He held my arm, not for support, but for guidance, because he was stone blind. He was thirty or thereabouts, I believe; but he looked twenty years older than I, who am now about twenty-six. Though he was Dutch by birth, he looked like an Asiatic,



being a small, dark Jew, with all the characteristics of his people; while I, with my fair skin, light hair, and large frame, am pretty true in appearance to my northern race. He was better dressed than any of us, for though he had accompanied us, and roughed it so far as board and lodging were concerned, he had taken only a financial part in the enterprise, his blindness naturally debarring him from a laborious part. His clothes retained something of their original appearance. Albeit he had worn them day after day for eighteen months at the least; whereas mine, what with exposure to the sun, the sweat of work, rough usage, and the strange devices employed in repairing them, were scarcely recognizable as Christian clothing. His face gave more sign of strain and fatigue than either the Judge's or mine, which might well be, seeing how great a relief to the mind physical labor is. There was a furrow between his brows, deep lines descending from the inner angle of the eyes, a pinched look about the nostrils and fleshless cheeks, that gave a fearful, strenuous eagerness to the weird expression of his face. And that expression was weird, nay, even repulsive, though his features were not ill-shaped, and it was due chiefly to the peculiarity of his eyes. Most people of dark complexion, like his, have a dark iris to the eye, but his was of a steely-gray, and was the more noticeable because there was the iris and nothing else; there was no pupil—nothing but that gray patch upon the yellowish ball of the eye. He kept his eyes open when his mind was preoccupied. Often, when he was sitting near me while I worked, I have changed my position that I might not see those ghastly eyes wide open to an African sun, yet unconscious of its glare. There was something terrible in his blindness.

Our rear was brought up by the "Kid." The name by



constant use and familiarity had long ceased to be slangy to my ear.

Poor little Lola! she was the raggedest and most disreputable of the lot, though it was not for that reason that she walked behind us; indeed, had she suspected that to follow implied inferiority, she would have marched ahead of her own father. That was her character.

The child wore a ragged red flannel petticoat, a camisole that had once been white, and a colored handkerchief tied loosely round her neck. She had a string of colored beads upon her wrist, but neither hat on her head nor shoe on her foot. Her purple black hair grew low down on her temple, and broke into curls over the ears at the nape of her neck, and wherever it was uncontrolled; it was matted together in a thick, loose plait that fell down to her waist, and tied at the end with a strip of red flannel, torn from her petticoat. She had the prettiest little hands and feet, a dark olive skin, a large but beautifully-shaped mouth, with the finest teeth I have ever seen, and a pair of glorious black eyes, full of audacity, and betraying only too faithfully her wild and ungovernable disposition. Properly dressed (and washed), she might have passed for a Spanish princess; in her present condition, there was no mistaking her for anything but the self-willed little savage she was.

The Kid had given us a deal of trouble—had we foreseen how much, I do not think Van Hoeck or I would have put in that postscript to the agreement \* which her father, the Judge, induced us to inscribe.

“The Kid has eyes in her head for to see with,” the Judge said, in urging her claim upon our future consideration, “end she kin use ’em as well as us in lookin’ for

\* See copy of Agreement on Frontispiece.



stones, end likewise, bein' a female, she kin cook our meals for us ; she kin wash our shuts, end she kin sew us up, end keep us nice end tidy." Whether she was capable of helping us in these matters I cannot say ; all I know is, that she didn't. "What kin you expect?" asked her father, in extenuation ; "her mother was the darter of a durned greaser, end it ain't the Kid's fault if she's got greaser blood in her."

We came up with the Judge at the dock gates, where he stopped to address a policeman stationed there.

"Kin you tell me, my friend," he said, "where the best bank in this town is located?"

I think the policeman's first impression, as he regarded us, was that we had felonious purpose in asking this question, for he did not reply immediately, and with reluctance directed us to the High Street, and told us to inquire there of someone else.

---

## CHAPTER II.

WE marched on to the High Street, our appearance attracting a good deal of attention, and creating some amusement and speculation doubtless. Persons on the opposite side of the road stopped to look across at us, others regarded us askant in passing and turned round to watch our progress, a few children followed us, thinking may be that we were about to give some kind of street entertainment.

We found a bank and streamed in, a small crowd collecting round the door, as it swung to behind the Kid. The clerks suspended their operations and looked at us in



open-mouthed astonishment as we ranged ourselves along the counter.

“Is the manager of this concern in?” asked the Judge — “Hands off,” he added, in a roar, as the Kid, slipping her lithe hand under the brasswork protecting the counter, began to finger the scales.

The Kid, unmoved, satisfied her curiosity, then, withdrawing her hand, rested her elbow on the counter, and dropping her chin in the palm, gazed at the clerks with stolid indifference.

“The manager is in, what do you want?” asked the clerk.

“Let up, Israel,” said the Judge, falling back a step, and waving his hand significantly toward Van Hoeck.

“We wish to negotiate a loan on the security of a large diamond that we have brought home from the Cape,” said Van Hoeck.

“Eight hundred and twenty carats, fust water,” added the Judge; “the grandest stone in this almighty universe!”

There was a whispered consultation among the clerks, and one went into a private room at the back of the bank, from which he presently returned with the manager.

“I am the manager; what do you want?”

Van Hoeck repeated his statement.

“And what security can you give me that the diamond is genuine,” asked the manager, with a pleasant smile, “or that it is legitimately yours to dispose of?”

“You will allow, sir, if anyone hed lost a stone of this kind he would have made it unsafe for us to walk about with it in the daylight,” replied the Judge, “and as for its bein’ genuine, you kin hev the security of your own eyesight.”



"I do not profess to be a judge of diamonds, and I can have nothing to do with it," said the manager definitively.

We streamed out of that bank as we had streamed into it, and tried another, but with no better result, the manager telling us that transactions of such a kind were altogether beyond the range of his business; and we found a third, but the manager was absent, and by this time, being convinced that the plan we had proposed was impracticable, we put our heads together in council at the corner of the street to determine what course we should take.

We were disgusted with Southampton, and, had we possessed the means, should have gone on at once to London, where we might have found some former acquaintance to help us out of our present difficulty. But we had nothing—nothing in the world but the things we stood upright in and the great diamond. For our smaller finds and our implements we had sold at Natal to make up enough to pay our steerage home, and our spare clothes, our knives, every available thing we had bartered away on our passage for food to supplement the miserably insufficient steerage fare.

"We kin not pawn the Kid," said the Judge, "and that's about the only perkisit as we could well do without."

It was now well upon three o'clock, and we felt the need of food, having eaten nothing since six, when our last rations were served out to us on the "Southern Cross." Our position was a desperate one. With millions in our possession, we might starve in the street, or have to take refuge in the work-house. It was odd, indeed, and very unpleasant also. At length, being unable to see any way out of our difficulty, we made our way to a police-station and laid our case before the inspector.



"Well, my good fellows," said he, having heard us out, "I don't see how I'm to help you. The mayor is the proper person to go to, but he's away yachting. The only person I can think of," he added, after a moment's reflection, "who might serve you is Sir Edmund Lascelles. He's got a kind of museum, and buys up curiosities, I know; and a kind old gentleman he is, too. Now, if he's at home——"

We asked him hurriedly where Sir Edmund lived, and he replied that it was out Lymington way—Monken Abbey—eight or nine miles, and anyone would tell us the way.

Well, there was nothing better to be done; so we got the inspector to give us a more definite direction, and then started off in search of the abbey. The Judge swinging along ahead at a good four miles an hour, the Kid had to trot to keep up with us; but I gave her my hand, and she did not complain—it was not in her nature to show suffering in the ordinary way.

It must have been about six o'clock when we found the park entrance to Monken Abbey, and there we were stopped by the lodge-keeper, who refused to let us pass without permission from Sir Edmund; but when he heard that we had been sent by the inspector of police at Southampton, he sent his wife up to the house, to know if the baronet would see us.

We sat on a bank near the lodge gate close upon an hour before we learned our fate; for Sir Edmund was at dinner when the message reached the house, and the servants did not choose to deliver it until he had dined. A servant led us through the park to the abbey, and took us into a beautiful hall, wainscoted with dark oak, and hung with antlers, old armor, and other suitable decorations;



and here we waited until Sir Edmund Lascelles came to us. Our spirits rose at the first glimpse of the handsome, portly old gentleman. There was benevolence in the little curls of his soft white hair, and the promise of kind treatment in the genial smile with which he greeted us.

"Well," said he, cheerfully, "you have something to sell me, have you?"

"Yes," I replied, "if you can buy it; it is a diamond."

"A diamond! Ah, that's a costly kind of curiosity, but I like them for all that; have you got it with you?"

"Yes," said I; and, turning over my hand, I opened it, showing the leather case strapped to my wrist, which contained the Great Hesper, as we called our diamond. The baronet was thunderstruck by the prodigious size of the stone, for he could see that the leather fitted it closely.

"You tell me that this is a diamond?" he exclaimed, lifting the case as it lay on my hand.

"We had it tested at Natal," said Van Hoeck; "it is a white diamond, and if not of the first water, is certainly of the second; it weighs 820 carats."

"Is it possible? Come with me. Eight hundred and twenty carats!" said Sir Edmund, in great excitement. "Bring a light into the library at once," he called to one of the servants.

We went into the library, where I cut the stitches of the case, took out the Great Hesper and put it into Sir Edmund's hand, by which time a reading-lamp had been brought in.

"It is true! it is true!" said he, examining it under a powerful light. "A wonderful stone—a perfect form—a prodigy! Come here, Edith; look at this!"

A young lady who had entered the room drew near. It was only by looking at the facet we had had cut and pol-



ished that she could distinguish that this was a diamond, for it was dull and gray, and looked like a lump of glass that had passed through the fire.

"It is an extraordinary size, is it not, papa?" she asked.

"Extraordinary, indeed! The Koh-i-noor is not a fourth of the size! See what the book says about that; get down Haydn, my dear."

Miss Lascelles fetched the book, while her father still examined the stone, as an artist might a masterpiece, and presently read aloud—

"Its original weight was nearly 800 carats, but it was reduced by the unskilfulness of the artist—Borghese, a Venetian—to 279 carats; its shape and size resembled the pointed half rose cut of a small hen's egg; the value is scarcely computable, though two millions sterling have been mentioned as a justifiable price, if calculated by the scale employed by the trade. This diamond was recut in 1852, and now weighs 102½ carats."

"Good, good!" cried the baronet. "With skilful cutting, a diamond of such a form as this need not lose 100 carats. Heavens!" he exclaimed, turning to us, "you have the greatest treasure in the world."

"Give me your hand, Thorne; hold me," said Van Hoeck in a low voice, and speaking thickly.

I turned quickly, and caught him as he reeled forward; for he had fainted, either from the want of food, from intense excitement, or both.



## CHAPTER III.

WHEN Van Hoeck recovered, and the baronet heard of our long fast, he took us at once into the dining-room, and had us served with the best he could give. It was a repast to recompense us for our long privations, and for a time we famished wretches forgot our treasure in the keen, animal pleasure of satisfying the craving of hunger. Sir Edmund sat at the table with us, directing the servants, who surely had never before waited upon such strange company. One could see that it was a real delight to this large-hearted man to see us eat and drink. Miss Lascelles herself waited upon Van Hoeck, attending to his wants with feminine tact and delicacy; his affliction appealed to her womanly sympathy.

She was a tall and graceful girl, with her father's fair complexion, bright, mirthful eyes, that added to the happy expression of her face, and beautiful soft brown hair, that took golden lights and chestnut shadows in its undulation. She looked you in the face with a fearlessness only possible to those who are perfectly healthy and perfectly honest. To the charm of physical beauty was added a faultless manner—the complete self-command and unfailing grace inseparable from a lady of birth and education. She was as courteous to us, who must have seemed the veriest outcasts of society, as though we were her equal. A true lady can never be ungracious.

Her presence had an indescribable effect upon my senses—the effect of fine music after discord. I was conscious of a return from savagery to civilization. But it was not until my gross appetite was satisfied that I became susceptible to the new delight.



The baronet spoke not one word about the diamond during dinner, but when it was all over he said :

“ Well, now we will go back to the library : and you shall come with us, Edith, if our cigars will not be disagreeable to you, for we have a marvellous matter to talk about.”

In the library Miss Lascelles seated herself beside her father, while we three men sat facing them on the other side of a small round table, on which I placed the diamond. At a little distance from us there was a lion skin on the floor, and on this the Kid threw herself, and as she lay there looking toward us, with her chin resting in the palms of her hands and her elbows planted in the fur, we saw scarcely anything of her but her great lustrous eyes, because of the shadow thrown by the lamp-shade.

“ Now let us understand the position of things to begin with,” said Sir Edmund, taking a cigar, after handing the box to us.

“ This will explain a good deal,” said I, putting in his hand the copy of our agreement.

He held it that his daughter might read it with him, and having come to the end said :

“ Might I ask which is the Judge ? ”

“ That’s me,” said Brace, with some pride ; “ appointed by the Long Pike Vigilance Committee in ’56.”

“ You are an American ? ”

“ Located as such for twenty years ; born in Cornwall.”

“ And Jan Van Hoeck ? ”

“ That’s Israel,” responded the Judge, indicating Van Hoeck ; “ and darkness fell upon ’em,” he added, explanatively.

During a short space of his eventful career Brace had earned a precarious existence as a travelling preacher.



"Then you are Bernard Thorne," the baronet said to me, "and Lola is——"

"The Kid," said Brace; "her mother was a greaser—a Mexican," he explained to Miss Lascelles. The dinner had warmed his spirits and loosened his tongue, and he continued, "We were drawed together at Cape Town by an advertisement in the paper. Our afflicted brother wanted to stake his little pile upon a mining venture. He hed studied the thing scientific'ly; he had laid out a kinder chart in his head, pricked down where the great finds had been made, sorter reasoned out the cause thereof, end sot his mind firm as a big find was to be made in a certain spot known only unto himself. We conversed, and he perceived without much difficulty, as he hed found the right sorter partner in me, end he kinder left it with me to find a third party to jine in the venture. I spotted out Gentleman Thorne here among a dozen. I liked the shape of his chest and shoulders; I liked the look of his face; I see that though he was outer luck, he was a gentleman, every inch of him; and I tell you, miss," he said, addressing Miss Lascelles, "that though I ain't no gentleman myself, I back blood and breedin' ag'in all creation. A man like Gentleman Thorne, who has been kep' clean in his infancy, fed wholesome, trained up in a public school, and been learnt to respect hisself and God Almighty, has better temper, more endurance, more pluck and fightin' power to overcome and win, than a dozen of the muckers that bounce about bein' workin'men." He paused a moment to let his words make due impression, and then continued, "Gentleman Thorne had no experience, but he had a hundred pound to put inter the concern, and that fetched Israel just as much as his looks fetched me. Israel had three hunderd. I hed nothing in the shape of dollars,



but I threw in the Kid, which, being a female, was calculated to be useful unter us in the nat'ral order of things. What we hed we lumped in, and by written agreement drawed up mutual, we undertook to play it out to the bottom dollar and the pint of starvation. We worked, sir, through thick and thin, through the measliest streak of luck mortal man ever struck.

“Israel was the first to funk it. ‘My calc’lations are wrong; it’s a hopeless venture, let us chuck it,’ he says; to which Gentleman Thorne replies—‘No,’ he says, ‘we’ll stick to our colors and fight it out,’ says he; end he did his level best to cheer us on. You should have heered him there a-whistlin’ like a black-bud, singin’ songs, drawin’ us out of ourselves, and makin’ a pleasant joke out of our bad luck. Ast the Kid down there who was her best friend in that trouble. She’ll tell you it was Gentleman Thorne, not her father. She had a bit of a fever—it was him made up a bed for her, built a screen to keep the sun off, walked fifteen mile in the night to get things from the store, set up night after night to give her water, end used for to sing out about the sleeping beauty and Cinerella, while he was peggin’ away at the durned stones. I will allow, Miss, I were ashamed to let him see I was losin’ heart, and when I felt like blaspheming at things in gen’al, I used to take a short walk and let off all my swearin’ where he couldn’t hear me. Well, it did look as ef we had hooked on to the everlastin’ fish-kittle. Then Israel funked it a second time. ‘We hev still a few pounds left,’ he says to Gentleman Thorne, ‘let’s throw up the cards,’ which they might hev done without going from our written word, they two formin’ a majority. But Gentleman Thorne wouldn’t agree to it. It wouldn’t be fair to the Judge, he said, and then he promised that if we failed in



the end he'd stick by Israel, and keep him like his own flesh and blood until he found the means of keeping himself, w ich was more than I'd hev promised him, I will allow. Well, we played on till the last cent was spent in stores, and the stores had got down to half a tin of beef, and a screw of shag, and then I lighted on a two-carat stone. The very next day Gentleman Thorne found the Great Hesper. We couldn't allow it was real, yet we sorter thought it was. Anyhow, we didn't sleep till we got to Natal and had it tested. We sold the littler stone, and scraped enough together to pay our passage to Southampton by the next boat. In committee we agreed to go to a bank and raise money on the diamond as soon's we landed, but no one wouldn't take us on, end if the police hadn't put us on this track I'm durned if I know what partic'ler 'ole we should hev been stickin' in at the present moment."

During this recital, which I have abbreviated considerably, Van Hoeck, who despised the Judge and abominated all he said, sat with his eyes closely shut, his nostrils pinched, and his black brows creased together, so that they almost met. Miss Lascelles listened with intense interest, her pretty lips just parted, and I thought she looked more kindly upon me for the glowing eulogium—of which I have omitted a great part—paid to me by Brace.

The Kid changed her position, seeming to catch some of her father's enthusiasm, and, sitting upon her heels with her hands clasped before her, turned her flashing eyes sometimes upon me, but more often upon Miss Lascelles, as if to catch the effect of this narrative.

"One thing is obvious," said Sir Edmund cheerfully; "you won't want to leave me to-night."

"Neery one on us, you bet!" replied the Judge, while



Van Hoeck and I expressed the same sentiments in other words.

The baronet spoke in a low tone to his daughter, who rose and left the room.

“The next thing to consider is,” he then said, “how can I be of service to you in this affair. To purchase your treasure is of course altogether out of the question. But I should like to buy a small—a very, very small—share in it, paying down a certain sum for your present convenience, and taking it back when the diamond is ultimately disposed of, with a reasonable percentage upon the outlay. I make this suggestion as a matter of business, that you may feel yourselves free from any restraint in accepting my offer.”

It took us but a few moments to agree to this proposal.

“In that case,” he proceeded, “I should wish to have a voice in the management of this business, and the first suggestion I should make is, that the finest artist in work of this kind be engaged to cut the diamond under this roof, and that during the operation you should take up your residence here. This precaution is necessary for the safe keeping of the treasure, and for our own common security.

This arrangement was too obviously advantageous to us to require argument; we consulted together, and quickly agreed to accept the condition.

Sir Edmund read the agreement through again, and then said :

“We must consult a lawyer with regard to a legal form of agreement. Here there is a kind of tontine arrangement by which one would receive an enormous advantage by the death of his partners. It is an uncomfortable clause, and I do not see the necessity for its existence, now



that the circumstances which called for its being made are changed. A lawyer may provide for our security without exposing us to ugly possibilities. That, however, can all be settled later on. There is no hurry. It will be time enough to make the legal arrangement when we have ascertained the value of the property to be arranged, and that we cannot know before the stone is cut. We will question the best firms in London with regard to a lapidary, and take our time. Meanwhile, I will supply you with what money you want upon your I O U, and the diamond shall remain in your keeping. Talk it over among yourselves at your leisure, and any modification you may think advisable I have no doubt I shall be able to accept."

Miss Lascelles returned to the room, and spoke to her father. Then she went to Lola, who had curled herself up on the skin, and knelt down beside her. The girl was not asleep; she started up into a sitting attitude as Miss Lascelles approached, and flung off the hand that was laid tenderly on her arm.

"You don't dislike me, Lola?" the young lady asked, smiling.

"Yes, I do," the girl replied, savagely.

"But I want to be your friend."

"We shan't never be friends."

I lost Miss Lascelles's response, for a servant entered the room, and Sir Edmund addressed us:

"Your rooms are ready," he said; "Johnson will show you to them if you feel you would like to turn in."

The prospect of sleeping once more in a good bed brought us to our feet at once.

Miss Lascelles, undaunted by the first rebuff, had got Lola's hand in hers, and was talking in a low, endearing tone to her. The Kid snatched her hand away, started to



her feet, and came to my side, seeing we were about to go.

"A little cuss," said the Judge; "you must excuse her, Miss. Her mother was a greaser, and she's never had any kindness shown her, except by Gentleman Thorne. A lick with the strap is what she understands best. No, Miss," he added, when Miss Lascelles offered to take Lola to her room; "leave her to me. There ain't nothing but disappointment and vexation of spirit to be got out of the ungrateful little varmint."

The room given to the Kid was the prettiest imaginable, with hangings of white lace over blue silk, and everywhere the eye was pleased with some pretty evidence of care and taste. The bed was suggestive of coziness and fresh virgin purity at the same time. I might have taxed my ingenuity in vain to have invented such a room in the stories I have told to Lola. We left the Kid there, leaning against the wall, her unfathomable eyes looking around her in sullen curiosity.

In the morning the room was found empty, the bed untouched, the floor covered with shreds of the clothing Miss Lascelles had laid out for Lola's use, and which, undoubtedly, the little savage had torn up.

Poor little Lola! She and I had always been the best of friends, except when a question of cooking or washing occurred to trouble us. She would yield to my persuasion when nothing else would bend her stubborn spirits. She feared my silent reproach more than the scathing sarcasm Van Hoeck treated her with, or the heavy hand of her father. She respected no one but me, probably because I alone respected her feelings.

Had I foreseen that night the course she was about to take, I might, with a little patient persuasion, have brought



her to reason. My spirit is weighed down with regret when I think how perhaps a dozen words from me at that time would have turned aside the fearful consequences of that act—an act so slight, yet followed by terror upon terror, by crime upon crime.

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## CHAPTER IV.

I MUST summarize as briefly as possible the events that took place the week following Lola's flight, not because I find them lacking in interest—for indeed these were the happiest days I had ever spent—but because the lengthy description would unduly retard the progress of the history I have set myself to narrate.

On the morning of the 15th, search was made for Lola. She was not in the house. A little after midday, one of the keepers, sent out to explore the abbey woods and park, reported that he had seen the fugitive in the fir plantation, about half a mile from the abbey. At sight of him she had “scuttled” away like a young deer, but he, obedient to orders, had not pursued her.

“It's the smell of the pines as drawed her there,” said the Judge; “she was born amongst 'em, she has lived amongst 'em, and she loves 'em more than laces and satins, and picters, and sich like; and it's more nat'ral for the little cuss to sleep on the brown needles than in feathers. There's no tamin' her. It's instinc', end, like foul weeds in a fair pasture, durn her, there's no gettin' it out of her. Leave her alone, sir, and she'll come in when she's hungry, and then I will larn her the iniquity of ongratitude!”



In the afternoon we went in a break to Southampton, driving slowly through the woods, with the possibility of being seen by Lola, who would certainly then have followed us, but we saw nothing of her. At Southampton we bought decent clothes, and spent some time in the hair-dresser's. I had my beard shaved off; and we returned to the abbey, very much altered for the better in appearance.

Miss Lascelles was much distressed about Lola, who was still absent. Brace's explanation of her leaving the abbey seemed a reasonable one, but her antipathy to Miss Lascelles, which led her to destroy the things she had given her, was to me a mystery, to Miss Lascelles also, I believe, and a very painful one. She seemed to feel herself in some inscrutable way responsible for the girl's action.

Sir Edmund returned in the evening from London.

"Now, indeed, you look yourself—a gentleman," he said, shaking my hand cordially. He had made inquiries respecting a lapidary, and learned that the most expert known to the trade was a man named Carvalho, then occupied at Madrid. With our sanction he wrote at once, offering this man his own terms, to come to the abbey, and cut the Great Hesper.

At night, the door by which Lola was supposed to have escaped from the abbey was left open, and a night-light was placed in her bedroom.

The next morning the dairy-maid said that someone had been at her milk-pans in the night; there was no other evidence of Lola having entered the house. After breakfast, I determined to go through the woods myself in search of her. Miss Lascelles wished to accompany me. I ought to have pointed out to her that her company lessened the chances of Lola suffering me to approach her, but



I could not deprive myself the pleasure of having such a sweet companion. We saw Lola at the edge of a clearing on the hill-side. She watched us as we drew near. I called to her, but she shook her head, and, turning her back upon us, quickly disappeared among the pines. The forlorn condition of the girl; her gesture, which seemed full of sadness; the silent fall of leaves; the tristness of the autumn woods, overcame Miss Lascelles; and as she walked silently beside me, with her head bent, I saw that she was crying. This episode made a deep impression upon me; yet while my heart ached with sympathy for the poor little savage wandering alone in those silent, still woods, an indescribable happiness stole over my senses. It was the awakening of love.

Sir Edmund had a basket of food placed in the dairy, and the doors again left open.

On the 17th we learned that some bread and fruit had been taken from the dairy in the night. Sir Edmund and I walked through the woods: we saw nothing of Lola. Our conversation turned upon his daughter, and he told me how she had consoled him for the loss of his wife. He spoke with natural pride of her sweet and loyal disposition. Later on, falling upon the subject of the great diamond, he asked me how I came to be a miner. I told him of my loss by the failure of the Imperial, of the impossibility of my getting my living as a clerk, etc. Incidentally I referred to my mother's family, and the name leading him to make further inquiries, he discovered the curious fact that my mother must have been his wife's cousin. How often do we find wide circles of friends linked together in this way! I thought that Miss Lascelles was greatly pleased with the discovery of the distant relationship existing between us; we seemed less remote from each other.



During our absence Miss Lascelles had devoted herself entirely to Van Hoeck ; her sympathy had a remarkable effect upon this strange man. When I took him up to his room to dress for dinner, he asked me to open the windows, and place him where he might feel the air. He sat before the open window ; the setting sun was reflected upon his sightless eyes. I believe he became unconscious of my presence, and I stood there watching the play of his features. His nostrils dilated, his brows creased together, his lips parted, showing his teeth closely set, the whole expression of his face indicating extreme dread ; then the muscles relaxed, for a moment his cadaverous cheeks were tinged with color, the eyes closed, and the lips trembled as if in ecstasy. Again his lids rose, and the look of dread returned to his face. He shrunk back in his chair, and blinked his eyes as though struggling to give them light ; then suddenly he flung out his arms wildly, and with a smothered cry of impotent rage buried his face in his hands, his long, thin fingers pressing the throbbing veins which stood out knotted and hard upon his temples.

“What is the matter, old man ?” I asked, putting my hand on his shoulder.

He started, and answered impatiently :

“Nothing, nothing—a dream !” And then he asked savagely—“Who watches you in the night ?”

“This is not the night,” I replied, fancying he was yet but half awake.

“Isn’t it ?” he asked, turning his eyes from one side to the other ; then stretching out his hands, as if to heaven, he cried—“Then what is the night ?”

Poor wretch, all was indeed night to him. I tried to engage him in conversation, but he waved his hand impatiently, and, getting up, felt his way to the wash-stand.



“Go down,” he said; “Miss Lascelles is more pleasing to the eye than I am; she must be beautiful, for her voice is music, her touch is like the petal of a rose. Where do you keep the diamond—is it safe?”

I told him that I now kept it in a belt buckled to my waist.

“Strap it to your wrist again: it is safer,” he said; and then, bending his head aside, he listened attentively for a moment and continued, in a lower voice: “They are talking together down there. Creep down and listen. I tell you we are not safe here—I see that through my blindness. I have faculties in place of that I have lost. Do you hear them? Come closer, Thorne; there is a conspiracy in this house—a plot to rob us of our treasure, and turn us beggars again upon the street. If I could trust you, I’d tell you more. But everyone is a thief who has the power to steal.”

It was not the first time I had heard him talk in this vein. At Natal, on the ship, he had been in constant dread of being robbed. I was glad to get away from him. As I passed the head of the stairs in going to my room, I distinguished the sound—too distant before to tell upon my dull ear—of Sir Edmund’s voice and the Judge’s; they were in the library below. After dressing, I joined them, and found Sir Edmund greatly interested in Brace’s description of gold-mining in California—a subject upon which he could be eloquent by the hour together.

On the 18th, Sir Edmund, Miss Lascelles and I rode over to Southampton. Miss Lascelles was in her gayest, happiest mood, and in her riding-habit looked more charming than ever.

In returning we met a friend of Sir Edmund’s; he accepted the invitation to take lunch at the abbey, and



rode beside the baronet, ahead of us. We two took the hill so slowly that, coming to the cross-roads, we could not see Sir Edmund and his friend. There were two ways to the abbey. After a little deliberation, Miss Lascelles laughingly consented to take the longer one.

The morning was superb; the woods were glorious. The rich, warm tints of the reddening foliage were reflected on my beautiful companion's cheek; her eyes seemed to catch the glitter of the dew that still hung on the gossamers. I forget what we talked about, but she was full of mirth, and now and then the still woods rang with the musical cadence of her laugh. But suddenly the smile died from her face, and she said :

“We forget poor little Lola.”

And then, as if the words had conjured up her presence, the girl appeared, swiftly speeding between the red boles of the fir-trees. We stopped, and I called :

“Lola, dear, come and speak to me.”

She stood still, and looked as if irresolute whether or not to respond to my appeal.

“I will stay here. Go to her,” said Miss Lascelles softly.

But, as if she had divined my intention, Lola shook her head mournfully, as she had done before, and going her way was presently hid by the tall brake. As we crossed the opening where we had previously seen her, I looked back, and perceived her standing in the same place gazing after us. It was easy to conceive her misery, and the bitter feelings of her heart. She was unaltered, but I was no longer the rough toiler grateful for a tin of water fetched from the stream. All that was past. I was no longer her companion. I should never, never more share her hard fare, and look to her to lessen the hardships of existence.



On the 19th, we went again into the woods, but on foot, Miss Lascelles and I, straying thither without purpose from the garden, where we met. We came to a stream bridged by a single plank supported in the middle. There had been a hand-rail, but it had fallen away in decay. I gave her my hand, the fear of falling made her clasp my fingers tightly. She seemed to enjoy the little danger; it animated her face and eyes with the prettiest, most bewitching expression imaginable. Her hand seemed to communicate the quickened pulsation of her heart. But it was not fear—it was intoxication that agitated me; and when she put her foot in safety on the bank, and looked up into my face with bright laughter, I lost my head completely, I kept her hand in mine, and when she tried to withdraw it, I forced it to my lips, and pressed a kiss upon it. The color left her cheek, and in a tone of reproach she exclaimed: “Oh, Mr. Thorne!” and I was ashamed. We walked home, and were very silent on the way. I sought Sir Edmund at once, and, finding him alone, told him that I wished to make his daughter my wife. He was thunderstruck by this sudden and unexpected announcement.

“I love your daughter,” I said, “and I cannot stay in this house keeping my passion a secret.”

“Well,” said he, with rather rueful pleasantry, “you have lost no time, Mr. Thorne, but it would have been a poor compliment to my daughter had you failed to perceive her charms.”

“I should be dull indeed had she failed to impress me,” I replied.

We talked for some time, and finally he said, with emotion:

“I must give up my dear child, sooner or later. Her



happiness is dearer to me than anything ; and I can wish her no greater blessing than to find a good and worthy husband."

At that moment Edith opened the door, but, seeing us, she stopped in the entrance.

"Come here, Edith," said Sir Edmund ; and, taking her hand, he continued, "Mr. Thorne wishes you to be his wife ; is that your wish also ?"

She buried her burning face in her father's shoulder ; she could neither say yes nor no.

"It is a question that should not be decided hastily," the baronet continued ; "take time, my dear. Meanwhile, I see no reason for your leaving the house," he added, addressing me.

"Unless—" I faltered.

"Unless Edith wishes it," the baronet said, helping me out. "True. Shall you feel more at ease, dear, if Mr. Thorne goes away—for a certain time, say ? Shall he go ?"

Still screening her face, Edith shook her head, and then I knew that I had won a treasure greater than the Hesper diamond.

In the afternoon of the 20th, Sir Edmund said :

"I have been looking at your engagement, Bernard, from a practical point of view, and a fact occurs to me that, at such a time as this, would probably escape you. That agreement of yours *must* be altered. You will see that, for Edith's sake, what I call the tontine clause—a clause conferring upon the survivor a deceased partner's share in the Great Hesper—should be abrogated. It entails a risk which she must not be exposed to—you understand me ?"

I understood what he said perfectly, and agreed with him that the clause must be altered.



"Consult with your partners," he said, "as to what change is advisable. I expect my lawyer here on the 24th, and he can then draw up a legal agreement in accordance with our general wish."

I took the Judge into Van Hoeck's room that night, and there told him of my engagement to Miss Lascelles. Van Hoeck was visibly alarmed when he heard this; and when I went on to say that Sir Edmund wished the clause altered by his lawyer on the 24th, he said quickly, in a low voice:

"The crafty old fox! What does he mean by that?"

"His meaning is obvious enough," I replied; "if I marry Miss Lascelles, and die, she will be dispossessed of my share in the diamond. I can leave her only a legacy of debt."

"Yes, end thet ain't all on it," said the Judge, dragging his wiry chin-tuft through his hand and bending his brow. "Thet ain't all by a lump. We're playing with a marked card in the pack—a card as might tempt e'er a one on us to foul play."

"What on earth do you mean? Speak plainly if you can," said Van Hoeck, in angry impatience.

"Well, I mean this 'ere," answered the Judge, with slow impressiveness, "that if one of my pardners wasn't a gentleman, and t'other wasn't helpless blind, I'm durned if I'd go to bed without a six-shooter under my piller, and my finger on the trigger. I don't allude to one any more'n another, but we'll just take Israel's word for gospel, that everyone is a thief if you give him a chance of thievin'; end, at that rate, I'm just as likely as not to murder my two pardners, and git the whole of thet diamond to myself. Consequently, you will allow thet the squire has a double reason for wantin' thet agreement



altered: fur it ain't only the money he's got to secure on to his daughter, but her husbin's life likewise. Time enough for the young lady to be a widder in the nat'ral order of things in gen'al."

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## CHAPTER V.

WHEN I met Sir Edmund in the morning, I told him that my partners had agreed with me to alter the clause in the agreement, though we had not yet decided in what manner.

"I am glad to hear it," he said; "anything will be better than that agreement as it stands."

Edith came down late to breakfast. She looked pale and said she had overslept herself.

"For the first time in your life, I believe," said Sir Edmund. "You did not fall asleep quite so readily as usual—hey?" he asked, smiling.

"I could not sleep," she answered, but so gravely that I saw it was not from the cause the baronet implied—the love that had kept me awake; and then she added, "I have been terribly frightened."

We looked at her in astonishment and anxiety.

"I will tell you all about it," she continued, "because you may be able to explain what perplexes me, and that will be a great relief."

She paused, as if to collect her thoughts, and then said:

"I was nearly asleep when I noticed a sound coming from the window. It was as if someone was rapping upon the glass—not loudly or quickly, but softly, as though with the tip of the finger, and at intervals. I might have counted twenty or thirty between one tap and the next. I



took little notice of it at first, thinking that as I had left the window partly open, it might be the wind moving the Venetian blind; but after awhile, the persistent tap—tap—tap irritated me. I rose and lit a candle, then I went to the window. The lattice was just as I had left it. The blind hung perfectly motionless. I drew it up and looked out. There was a gray mist everywhere. Not a breath of air stirred; the flame of the candle burned as steadily as though the window had been closed. I let down the blind, and listened; there was not the slightest sound.”

“A moth on the ceiling,” said Sir Edmund; “they have worried me in the same manner. Then you get a light, and the thing stops.”

“Hold on, we ain’t heered the last on it, I kin see,” said the Judge, looking at Miss Lascelles intently, his shaggy brows bent over his quick eyes.

“I explained it as you do, papa. I put out the light, and tried to sleep. I heard no sound for quite ten minutes, I think, and then again that soft, slow tap—tap—tap came from the window—the same sound, with the same long interval between them. It was not like the beat of a moth’s wing. It was like nothing but the touch of a human finger. But I tried to think it was an insect in the wall—the insect that is called the ‘death-watch.’ And I did my best to take no notice of it, but I could not help hearing it; and after a time I grew frightened, and the sound grew dreadful in my ears. It became unendurable. I could not lie there listening passively. I got up again, and struck a match. The wick of the candle was slow to light, and during those moments I noticed that the sound had ceased. As I say, I was frightened—very frightened. And the unbroken silence seemed more terrible than the sound. There was something ghostly and supernatural



about it, that brought back the old terror I used to feel as a child in passing the room that is said to be haunted at night. And just then the clock in the belfry struck. I dared not go to the window. My hand trembled so that I could not take up the candle, but I looked toward the window. The first thing that struck me was that the laths of the blind, instead of lying flat, as they generally do, when down, and as I had left them, were opened and turned edgeway—do you know how I mean?"

She held her hands, that trembled with the recollection of her terror, one above the other horizontally.

"But the next thing," she continued, and then stopped, with a little shudder, while we who listened held our breath—"the next thing I saw was two great black eyes that caught the light from my candle in between the lower laths of the blind."

She paused, and then continued with more firmness—

"I think I fainted—I must have done so, for I was conscious of nothing after that, until I found myself upon the floor. The light was still burning upon the table. As recollection returned to me, I looked toward the window. The laths were no longer open, but turned flat. Then it occurred to me that all I had seen was merely imaginative—that it was merely a realistic dream—that I had gone through these experiences in my sleep. My great terror was gone. I went without fear to the window to ascertain if the night was as I had seen it. There was the gray mist; the flame of the candle did not flicker. Nevertheless, when I looked down and saw how impossible it was for anyone to have stood outside the window, I felt convinced that at least the vision of the two eyes was imaginary—an outcome of the fear I felt when I looked toward the window. I lay down again, and though I could not



sleep for some time, I heard no further sound whatever, save the chiming of the clock."

"Is it not very probable, my dear," said the baronet, "that the sound you speak of was also the outcome of fear?"

"I had no fear when I went first to the window. The sound was a reality. It is that I wish explained."

"Do you know what time it was when the tapping first began, Miss Lascelles?" Van Hoeck asked.

"It was a quarter to one by my watch when I recovered from the fit."

"May I ask, Miss, without offense, if a thing o' this kind hes ever happened to you afore?" asked the Judge.

"As a child I was timid, but I cannot remember ever being so frightened."

"You don't look as if a trifle would skeer you, I will allow;" and, rising from his chair, the Judge added, "if you'll excuse me, I'll go and prospect the place straight off, for I'm lorth to say it looks to me like as if the Kid had been taking a hand in this game."

"By all means," said the baronet; "the sooner the truth is discovered the better."

We all went out on to the lawn which faced that part of the building in which Edith's room was situated.

On the way, Van Hoeck, who had taken my arm for guidance, gripped it tightly and whispered:

"What did I tell you? This is the beginning of the end."



## CHAPTER VI.

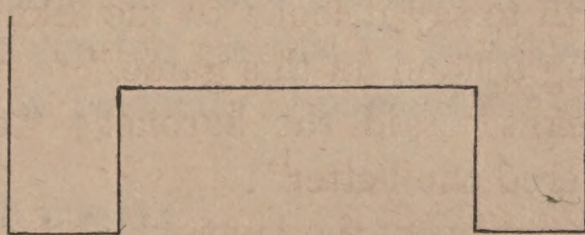
It is necessary for the reader to know what kind of building Monken Abbey was, and something of the disposition of its rooms, in order to follow clearly the action of the drama that took place within its walls. I can do no better than to give the description by which I brought the facts home to the comprehension of my blind partner.

"Tell me what you see, Thorne," he said, as we stood on the lawn.

"An old Gothic building, flanked by two later additions in the Tudor style, that project beyond it."

"I don't understand," he said, impatiently; "can't you make it clearer to me?"

I had a note-book in my pocket; pressing the metallic pencil hard upon the paper, I drew this rough diagram:



He passed his sensitive fingers over the impression.

"The two end blocks are the additions you speak of, the space between them, the old part. I understand. Go on," he said.

"The great door is in the centre of the old part, the dining-room is on one side, the library on the other. The floor above is occupied by the picture-gallery. It has a gable roof, and the belfry rises from the middle. The block on the right and that on the left are alike. The



ground floor is divided into drawing-rooms, sitting-rooms, kitchens, etc."

"Where is the dairy, and the door that is left open at night for the Kid?"

"At the back of the house: it cannot be seen from here."

"Is that in the right block or the left?"

"In the right; the kitchen is in the left. On the first floor are the principal bedrooms; the servants' are above. Our rooms are in the right block, Sir Edmund's and Miss Lascelles's are in the left."

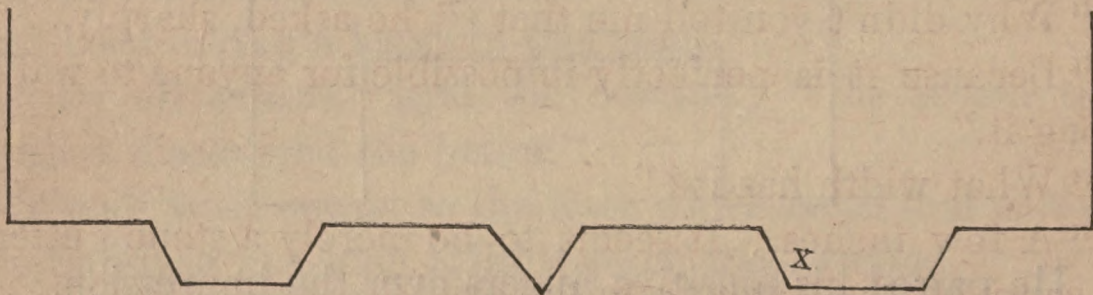
"What means of communication are there? For instance, how could Sir Edmund get to your room?"

"By simply passing through the picture-gallery."

"I understand; go on."

"There are two oriel windows and a bay in the end of the left block facing us as we stand here."

I drew another diagram to explain the windows to Van Hoeck. Here it is—



"The oriel on the left," I continued, "projects from Sir Edmund's room, that on the right from Miss Lascelles's. There are stone mullions at the angles of the oriel and lattice windows between, hung inside with Venetian blinds. I have marked a cross where Miss Lascelles saw the eyes looking through. The oriels are supported by corbels. They are perfectly inaccessible from the ground except by a ladder."



"But from the story above?"

"There are no windows over the oriel. The only means of descent would be by a rope from the roof."

"Are there any other means of getting at the window?"

"None whatever that any human being could use."

"What is this projection between the oriels?" he asked, feeling the paper.

"A two-sided bay carried up from the ground to the gable, pierced with latticed windows from top to bottom. It gives light to the stairs inside."

"Do the windows open?"

"Yes."

"And what distance is there between the windows in the bay and Miss Lascelles's window?"

"Seven or eight feet at least."

"And the wall between is perfectly flat?"

"There is a stone moulding runs along parallel with the floor of the first story and the base of the oriel."

"Why didn't you tell me that?" he asked, sharply.

"Because it is perfectly impossible for anyone to walk along it."

"What width has it?"

"A few inches. It seems to be merely a stone gutter to carry off the water from the oriel."

"Is there no ivy on the house—nothing to catch hold of?"

"There is no ivy, but there is a pipe midway between the bay and the oriel; it descends from the gable to the gutter."

"What! and you tell me it is impossible to get from the bay to the window!"

"I still mean what I said. The gutter is so narrow



that no one, even facing the wall closely, could stand on it and maintain a centre of gravity."

"But with the aid of the pipe?"

"The pipe is four feet from the bay, and four feet from the oriel. Now, suppose Lola, for I know whom you suspect, got from the window in the bay she would have to advance holding to the mullion of the window for support, and with one hand only, until the other could touch the pipe, a span of four feet."

"Four feet: that is not impossible, unless the girl is short limbed."

"It is impossible, if in holding to the mullion or the pipe the girl had to support part of her own weight."

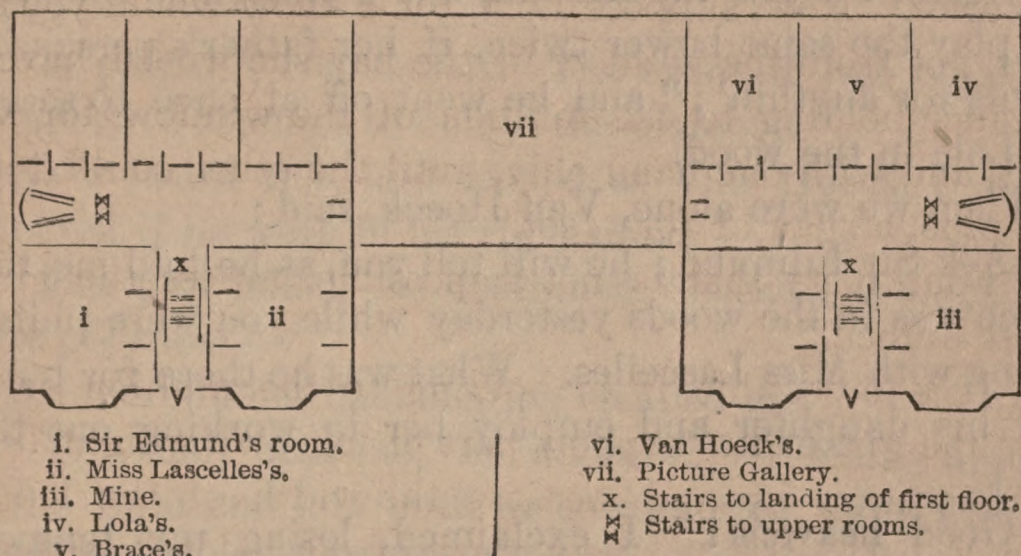
"Let us go up and measure the width of the ledge," said Van Hoeck; "it may appear from below less than it is."

We went up to my bedroom in the right block, which, as I have said, corresponded in every external respect to the block on the left; and from the oriel I measured the width of the stone ledge outside. Van Hoeck's supposition was just; it was wider than I expected, measuring a trifle less than my span, which is nine inches. Van Hoeck placed himself flat against a wall, and turning out his toes until he obtained the limit of width upon which he could sustain his equilibrium, bade me measure the distance between his heel and the wall. I found it was fully three inches within my span, and was astonished to perceive upon how narrow a space one may stand with safety. This settled the point. Lola might well have passed along the ledge with safety.

"Now," said Van Hoeck, "draw me a plan of the rooms, roughly and broadly, showing their relative position to the stairs, the bay, and the picture-gallery."



I complied with his request, marking the several parts with figures, which I explained to him in the order marked below.



## CHAPTER VII.

BUT I was still incredulous. How was the girl hiding in the woods all day to know of the existence of the ledge? It was true she had access to the house at night, but I doubted if it were possible for her to see the ledge in the dark even from the bay window. But admitting the possibility, would she risk her life for no purpose but to alarm Miss Lascelles? There was too much strength in Lola's character for such a senseless and feeble device to be acceptable to her. It was not the act of a rational being, but of a mischievous or malevolent idiot.

I was inclined to believe that the explanation Miss Lascelles had offered was a just one, and that what she had seen was purely imaginative and the result of fear, inspired by those mysterious sounds which might yet be explained.



This was not Van Hoeck's opinion, nor was it Brace's.

"I will not say the Kid has done it," he said; "there's no sayin' what greaser blood will not do. For the sake of argyment, we will say she did, but I ondertake she shall not play the same bower twice, if her father's persuasion counts for anythin';" and he went off at once to search for Lola in the wood.

When we were alone, Van Hoeck, said:

"Ask Sir Edmund; he will tell you, as he told me, that Brace was in the woods yesterday while you were philandering with Miss Lascelles. What was he there for but to find his daughter and employ her in working out this plot?"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, losing my temper; "what notion have you got hold of now? Last night you suspected Sir Edmund——"

"I would suspect anyone who has the opportunity to possess himself of such a treasure as you hold. Do you blame the man who protects himself when his life is in danger? That diamond *is* life to me? What could I do if it were lost? You hold that diamond—my life—in your keeping. You are bound to take every precaution for its safety. You have no right to despise my warning because it does not agree with your reckless trust in humanity."

"Take the diamond into your keeping, if you think it is not safe in mine," I said.

"You make that offer because you know I am powerless to accept it in my blind and helpless condition. How can I keep it against a man like Brace?"

"If you have more faith in my power to keep the diamond, why do you accuse me of neglecting its safety?"

"Because you blind yourself to the danger that exists. God!" he exclaimed, protruding his sightless eyes to the



light, and clinching his hands in frenzy, "to think that those who can see will not see!"

"What possible connection can there be?" I asked, "between the safety of our diamond and the event of last night?"

"A palpable connection. The event of last night was an abortive attempt to obtain the diamond."

As I heard this, and looked at Van Hoeck, I almost doubted if he were in his right mind.

"The plot failed," he continued, "because the girl *mistook the room*."

An incredulous exclamation escaped me.

"You shall hear me," he muttered, stretching his arm to the right and left until he encountered mine with his hand, and then clutching it tightly; "you shall see—with my eyes, if not with your own. You have urged that the girl could know nothing of the disposition of the rooms; but she might receive instructions from her father. He went into the wood to give her those instructions yesterday. Look at your plan"—he handed me the diagram I had drawn at his request (see p. 39)—"Brace, having his room at the back of the right block, would naturally tell her that when she got to the top of the stairs she was not to pass through the picture-gallery, but to go straight to the landing over the stairs she had ascended, open the window in the bay, which would then be on her left hand, and make her way to the oriel facing her. That, according to his calculation, would bring her to your window."

"Certainly."

"But he did not take account of the fact that the door by which the girl enters the house is at the back of the right block, and that the stairs by which she would ascend



to the first floor bring her to the landing between Sir Edmund's room and Miss Lascelles's. Thus, though carrying out her father's instructions to the letter, she must inevitably make her attempt upon Miss Lascelles's room and not upon yours. Look at your plan."

"I follow you perfectly well," I said, astonished by the ingenuity of his explanation, which had made a perfectly incredible supposition possible—nay, for the moment, probable.

"Are you convinced?" he asked, triumphantly.

"You have yet to explain how Brace thought to obtain the diamond by the means he employed. He would scarcely expect that *I* should faint with terror."

"Who said he would? Brace calculated upon dealing with a heavy sleeper, not a nervous girl. The tapping is described as soft and regular: it was intended to test whether you were asleep or not. The moment a light appeared the sound ceased—the girl had gone back to the bay. From the landing she could see when the light was put out, and it was safe to recommence the attack. The candle was lit with some difficulty the second time—Miss Lascelles possibly stood with her back to the window as she held the vesta. Lola may have detected the first glimmer, and uncertain or not whether it was safe to continue, turned the blind and looked through. At that moment the wick burned up, and Miss Lascelles, turning, saw the girl's eyes between the laths. The knocking was not repeated, for a simple reason—Lola had discovered her mistake, and retreated. Do you doubt now the purpose with which Brace has gone to seek the girl to-day?"

I was forced to admit that this explanation was feasible, yet I could not believe that Lola, who seemed sincerely attached to me, would consent to aid in my ruin



merely at the instigation of her father, whose authority she habitually disregarded. I said this to Van Hoeck.

"It is because she is attached to you—because she loves you," he replied, with emphasis, "that she would readily enter into her father's project to rob you of the diamond. The diamond is her enemy—it has separated you from her, and placed you side by side with Miss Lascelles, for whom she has manifested a jealous hatred from the very first. What could be more gratifying to her savage disposition than to take away the diamond that has created this difference between you and her, and to reduce you once more to her level. It is the only hope she can have of getting you away from Miss Lascelles, and restoring the former condition of equality upon which your companionship with her rested."

Again I was compelled to admit the force of Van Hoeck's argument.

"But why," I asked, "should Brace trust such a perilous undertaking to his daughter?"

"For an obvious reason," he replied. "If you caught her in the act of robbing, you would not raise your hand against her; if you caught him, you would blow his brains out. For her you would find excuse; for him none."

In this there was truth also.

"Talking of that," he continued, "what arms do you keep about you for defence?"

"None," I replied.

"I thought so. Take this," he said, drawing a long clasp-knife from his breast-pocket.

He showed the spring with which the narrow blade opened, and the catch which locked it at the back of the horn handle, and made me promise to use it for my de-



fence, no matter who attacked me. I also promised to close my window, which I habitually kept open at night, and to secure the fastening of that, as well as the door, before going to bed. Finally, he exacted that I should once more enclose the Hesper in the leather case, and strap it to my wrist the last thing at night.

The Judge did not return until dusk. He was fatigued, and his general appearance indicated a pursuit through rough and thorny ways.

"I hev seen the Kid," he said; "but she would not listen to reason; and not bein' afeered of spiling her clothes, she nat'rally got the best of the argument, and played it low down on her father."

He advocated starving her into better behavior, and would have had the door closed to cut off her communication with the dairy, but Miss Lascelles would not listen to this; she would not yield to fear, and declined to change her room or alter her ordinary habits.

We separated a little before eleven. The night was close and stuffy. I had no inclination to go to bed, especially as I had given Van Hoeck my word to close the window beforehand.

There was a reading-lamp in my room. I lit it, put out the candle, and seated myself in a comfortable chair with a book. Not a sound was to be heard after the clock struck eleven. I read on without moving from my chair until past twelve. From time to time I had taken my eyes from the book and listened intently—not in anticipation of hearing the mysterious tapping at my own window, but in apprehension of its being repeated upon Edith's—and as the last stroke of midnight reverberated through the still night I closed my book and listened



again. The silence without was so complete that the burning of the oil in the lamp at my side was distinctly audible.

At that moment I heard a board creak. It was so slight a sound that, had my attention been fixed upon the book, I should not have noticed it. I could not tell where it came from : I was not sure that it was not from the floor under my foot as I changed my position. Instinctively I looked toward the window. I could see nothing beyond the circle of light reflected by the lamp-shade. It was too absurd to take the lamp to the window—there was no board there to creak. I waited some minutes, and there being no repetition of the sound, I re-opened my book, but I paused with my finger on the page to listen once more. A shuddering sigh, like that of a child who is crying itself to sleep, reached my ear.

I went to the window, drew up the blind softly, and looked out ; for the sound had seemed to come from a distance, and I thought it might be the flutter of leaves in a breeze. But the night was unchanged—heavy and still, the moon obscured, and a thin gray veil of mist hanging over the lawn, as Edith had seen it the night before. I opened the door noiselessly. All was dark. I could see only the mullion of the bay standing out vaguely against the grayness. I listened. At night heavy curtains were drawn across the head of the corridor, shutting it off from the passage upon which it abutted at right angles : nevertheless, I could hear the stertorous breathing of the Judge or Van Hoeck from the rooms beyond. I was sure that the sound I had heard was not imaginary, and determined, if possible, to discover the cause. I went back to the table and fetched the lamp.

I had returned to where I stood by the door, when my



eyes fell upon something lying at the threshold. Another step, and I should have put my foot upon it.

In steadying the shade, my left hand screened the light ; as I withdrew it I saw that the object at my feet was Lola !

She had curled herself upon the mat within the embrasure of the door. Her face was toward me and pillowed upon her folded hands. She was asleep, yet her long black lashes were wet, and clung to her cheek with an undried tear.

“Even Van Hoeck, if he could see you now, poor child,” I said to myself, “could not think ill of you.”

I would not awake her ; I withdrew the light until she was in shadow, placed it on the table, fetched my book, and seated myself where I could read and yet watch the sleeper. As I did this, the clock in the belfry chimed the half-hour ; I looked at my watch, and saw that it was half-past twelve.

I could not fix my attention upon the book for some time, my mind being occupied with conjectures to account for Lola’s presence. It fitted in with Van Hoeck’s theory and warning in some respects, yet—possibly because my judgment was biased by sentiment—I could not believe she had come there with any sinister intention. I was rather disposed to think that she had found solitude no longer bearable, and had sought this resting-place to be near the only friend she knew.

As I pondered, my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, and I could see dimly the girl’s face, her arms scarcely distinguishable against her dusky camisole, and the darker mass of her red petticoat. She did not move. If she had evaded her father, it is possible that she had fatigued herself as well as him. My heart was stirred with pity, and I resolved that when she awoke I would try, if she would



listen to me, to reason her out of her savage isolation, and induce her to accept the kindness that Edith longed to bestow upon her. I would not purposely awake her, for in sleep there was the relative happiness of forgetfulness.

It was past one when I again began to read. From time to time I looked away from the page and assured myself that she was still sleeping. And so I sat watching and reading until past four o'clock, when the light began to fail, my eyes grew heavy, and unconsciously I fell asleep. I was awake by my book falling from my hands to the floor. The lamp was yet alight, but burning so dimly that, looking toward the door, I could see nothing. I carried the lamp that way. Lola was gone.

. . . . .

When we met at breakfast, Edith was in her customary bright and cheerful mood. Reassured by her appearance. Sir Edmund said, smiling :

“Well, my dear, has there been any recurrence of strange sounds and spectral sights during the night?”

“Yes,” she answered; “but they did not frighten me, for I knew it was only poor Lola.”

“Lola!” I exclaimed.

“I had left a light burning,” she said; “the blinds were turned downward, and the light shone upon them; the tapping woke me. It was just the same sound that I heard before. While I was looking at the blind before the open window, the tapping stopped, and I saw a finger come down between the third and fourth lath from the bottom, and turn the third; after that the finger slid in between the next two, and turned the second. Then I saw her two lustrous black eyes looking through. Almost immediately afterward they disappeared. ‘Don’t be afraid, Lola,’ I said, in a low voice, for I feared if she were



frightened she might slip from that terribly narrow ledge. I waited a few minutes, to give her time to get back to the bay, if she intended to, and then I drew up the blind and looked out. There was no one there, and the window in the bay was as we left it last night—closed.”

“Are you sure it was, Lola?” I asked.

“Yes, they were her eyes.”

“Do you know what time it was when you saw her?” I asked.

“I can be sure of that, for in taking my watch from the stand, it fell, breaking the glass and stopping the hands, and very soon after that I heard the clock strike.”

She showed me the watch, the minute-hand was so bent that it could not pass the hour-hand; when I lifted it, the movement recommenced, proving that the spring had not run down.

The hour marked by the hands was five minutes to one.

“*At five minutes to one Lola was sleeping at my door,*” I said.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

EDITH could not say whether the laths she had seen turned were open when she went to the window, and there were no means of confirming the fact afterward, because in pulling up the blind they would, if open, be returned to their former position. In face of my evidence, she was firmly convinced that what she had seen and heard was an extraordinary illusion of the senses parallel to that which furnishes the sole excuse for a tolerably widespread belief in supernatural appearances. She was ashamed of the feebleness of mind which her experiences seemed to imply,



and, resolved to overcome the weakness, she resisted all her father's persuasions to change those conditions under which she had passed the last two nights.

Van Hœeck alone refused to believe in Edith's hallucination.

"One has only to hear Miss Lascelles speak to discredit a notion of that kind," he said; "she has every sign of mental vigor and physical strength, and to accuse such a girl of that kind of morbid insanity called hallucination is just as creditable to your understanding as to believe in the simplicity and honesty of a vagabond Californian card-sharper and the half-breed wench he chooses to call his daughter."

When night came, he said to me, after we had separated from the rest:

"This is no time for sleep, Thorne; we must watch through the night, whether you like it or not, if it is *only* for Miss Lascelles's sake."

I readily agreed to this, and for an hour we walked on a part of the lawn from which I could see Edith's window. Then the rain, which had been drizzling for some time, fell heavily, and forced us to go in.

We changed our boots for slippers, and sat together in my room, I with a book, he with his chin in his hands, his face hideous with the light of the lamp on his protruding eyes.

Heaven knows, I was not wanting in love for Edith, or solicitude for her welfare, and yet I could not keep awake. It must be remembered that I had no sleep the preceding night, and that I *did* believe in Edith's hallucination, and therefore saw no actual danger menacing her. I tried to interest myself in the book, but my thoughts grew confused, the type swam before my eyes, and helped to be-



muse my senses. At length I put down the book, and shaking my wits together, I said to Van Hoeck:

"Let us talk."

"Talk!" he muttered, scornfully; "why not ask me to sing you a comic song! If the Kid were here I suppose you wouldn't want me to amuse you. You could keep awake until three or four in the morning watching her, but as it's only your future wife who is concerned, you are log-headed before midnight."

This sarcasm did not prevent me dozing again a few minutes later. I was ashamed of my drowsiness, and after a minute's doze I would wake with a guilty start, only to drop off again in a few moments. I know not how long this had been going on, when Van Hoeck shook me by the arm, and woke me thoroughly.

"It is courting destruction to sit here with the door open," he said, "one of us blind, and the other dead asleep. I cannot stand it any longer; it is intolerable. Tell me if it rains."

I went to the window, and found that the rain had ceased. I told him this.

"I will go out: take me down to the door," he said.

I led him down-stairs, and gave him his umbrella and hat. Then I took mine and opened the door quietly, fearing to awake Edith. I would have accompanied him, but he refused, saying night and day were alike to him, and he knew his way along the paths and about the lawn.

"Go back to your room and fasten yourself in," he said, "it is our only security. Tap at the window to let me know that all is fast. I beg you to do this," he added, earnestly: "you cannot understand the feelings of a man in my position—the torture of conscious impotency as you feel the approaching fate that you are powerless to avert."



His voice rattled in his throat, and indistinctly I heard him mutter, as he groped his way along the wall of the terrace :

“Cramped in a coffin, and the clods falling, falling——”

I closed the door, and returned to my room with a shudder.

When I had fastened myself in I tapped at the window, and Van Hoeck replied by tapping on the wall below.

The fresh air had revived me ; I had no longer to struggle with an irresistible drowsiness—the inclination to sleep was gone.

I had my book to finish, but my mind was not sufficiently composed to read. As I walked about the room I thought of Edith and of Van Hoeck, wondering if there could be any connection between her strange hallucination and the terrible presentiment which night and day possessed him. It seemed as if there must be something abnormal in the conditions under which we lived, to produce an effect which, though characterized by different peculiarities, was in both cases attributable only to a disordered imagination, and I wondered if I, in my turn, should come under this occult influence.

I might have been occupied with the speculation for half an hour or more when I heard a scream of terror that I could not doubt came from the wing in which Edith lay. In an instant I opened the door and ran through the corridor. The doors in the picture-gallery were open. As I drew aside the curtains which closed in the staircase corridor of the left wing, I saw Sir Edmund come from his room with a lamp. The door of Edith's room exactly faced his ; it was wide open ; all was dark within.

“What is it, my dear, what is it ?” he called, as he entered the room.



There was no answer.

I followed to the door. Sir Edmund was standing by the empty bed looking around him in blank dismay.

"She is gone," he gasped. "The door was wide open——"

The bed stood away from the wall. I bade Sir Edmund look on the further side.

There was scarcely room for him to pass between the foot of the bed and the wall, but as he lowered the light, he said, in quick alarm :

"She is here—unconscious—ring the bell for the women."

I ran to the bell and rang it violently ; then from the stairs in the cross-gallery I called to the servants to come down. In the meanwhile Sir Edmund had raised Edith and placed her on the bed, where she lay like one dead.

From his room I got a spirit-case, but we knew not how to apply the remedies at our hand, and it was an intense relief to us when the housekeeper bustled in, followed by Edith's maid, for we were as helpless as children in this emergency.

The housekeeper told me to leave the room. I went to the door, and stood there, trembling from head to foot.

I had taken Edith's hand, and the icy coldness of the lifeless fingers that I had only known quick with warm blood chilled my very heart with fear.

There was a long period of terrible suspense, and then I heard the dear voice murmur, and my heart bounding with joy, I ventured forward that I might see the life once more in her beautiful face. Sir Edmund stopped me on the threshold.

"Thank God !" he said, fervently, "she has come back to us ; but the women say she must be kept quiet. Go



back to your room, my dear fellow, and we will talk it all over at breakfast-time. Good-night, good-night."

I returned reluctantly to my room. As I passed his chamber I heard the Judge snoring loud and long.

It needed something more than such trifles to wake him when he had a bed to sleep in.

What already puzzled me was how Edith's door came to be wide open when she had fainted in a quite remote part of the room.

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## CHAPTER IX.

WHAT happened in Edith's room that night I did not learn until the next morning, but I will give her account in this place in order to preserve the sequence of events.

True to her resolve, she had left the window open and the blind down, exactly as on the preceding nights. It was her habit to lock the door, and that she did not omit to do so on this occasion she was convinced by the fact that she found some difficulty in turning the key, and had afterward tried the handle to know if the bolt was shot. She left the lamp burning on the table, screened from her by the lace curtains of the bed. It was half past eleven when she lay down, and she felt so little fear that she fell asleep almost immediately.

A pillow slipping from beneath her head awoke her, she believed. Her first consciousness was that her head felt uncomfortably low. She put her hand out to find if she had slipped to the edge of the bed; but no, her position was unchanged.

Then it struck her that she had left a light on the table; it was now out, and all was dark.



She wondered if this was a trick of imagination. Was she awake or asleep? She touched her eyes to be sure they were open. Then it occurred to her that she might have been asleep a long while. There was nothing extraordinary in a lamp going out, or her head slipping from the pillow. Saying this to herself, she felt for the pillows.

To her astonishment she found that both were gone.

It was droll. She felt inclined to laugh, thinking how she must have tossed about in her sleep to knock both pillows out. But the bedclothes were perfectly smooth, the bed on each side of her even, and soft, and yielding. That was strange!

"I must have done all the tossing with my head," she said to herself, still tickled by the oddity of the thing.

One thing was certain—she could not sleep in comfort with nothing but a bolster under her head.

She leaned out and felt upon the floor as far as she could reach to the right. The pillows had not slipped out on that side. Then putting her shoulder against the wall she felt down on the left. There was nothing there. What did it all mean? Decidedly this must be a new freak of her imagination.

She was not yet thoroughly frightened. The spirit who could steal her pillows must have some sense of humor; it was preferable to drumming on the window-panes and glaring through the blinds at her. Hearing and sight had been tried, and now her sense of touch was to be tested.

But though she tried to make light of the affair, she felt that something terrible underlay its comic aspect, and a little shiver ran through her at the thought of getting up and striking a light. It was so much easier to be courageous in the daylight than in such darkness as this.



After all, perhaps the pillows *had* slid out of the bed in a natural way, and lay only just a little beyond her reach. But rather than stretch her arm out again in the dark space, she preferred to put up with the bolster doubled.

She doubled the bolster and gave it a little pat; then she put up a lock of hair that had come down, and told herself not to be stupid about a little thing like that; and, wondering whether she should dare to tell of this incident in the morning, she dropped on her elbow, and laid down her head—down, down, down till it touched the bed.

“What was this?” she asked herself, starting up in a fright. She felt from side to side; now the bolster was gone; there was nothing there but the bed.

But this pantomime trick was no longer comic. She felt the tears of fright springing in her eyes, and something rising in her throat. Cold fear chilled her to the bone.

Was she in reality awake? The striking of the clock in the belfry assured her of that.

Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong it lightly chimed: and the hour was tolled out slowly, sonorous, solemn:

Boom, boom, boom, boom.

But if this was not hallucination, what was it? The work of actual hands? What then? If they had no more direful intention than to play a trick of this kind, they were not to be feared. It was not terrific; it was merely childish mischief, and this reflection suggested that, after all, it might only be Lola who was trying to frighten her. And just for one moment, as she leaned back on her elbow, she fancied she saw something like those luminous eyes in the midst of the darkness, and close to her—there! there, above her, toward the side of the bed.

“Is it you, Lola?” she asked, but in a voice so faint,



for she was sick with fright, that she herself could hardly hear the words she spoke.

It was a fancy, or the eyes were turned away. Yet, still leaning upon her elbow that quivered under her, she strained her eyes to penetrate the darkness.

Not long, perhaps, though it seemed so, her heart beating painfully, her mouth parched and dry, the hot breath catching the back of her throat.

Something seemed to be touching her hair. Was it the lace curtain?

She raised her trembling hand, and felt something level with the top of her head. But it was not the curtain. *It was the pillow, or she was mad.*

Her strength gave way, and she fell back upon the bed; but the terrible suspicion that the pillows had been withdrawn for the purpose of smothering her made her throw her hand up.

The pillow had descended: it was close to her face. She tried to scream, but the pillow was already upon her mouth, and smothered the cry.

It closed down upon her head, firm and hard. She could no longer breathe. It pressed upon her throat, as she lay with the back of her head pushed down into the bed.

The touch of Death aroused the instinct of self-preservation within her, and, with a frantic effort, she tore herself from under that suffocating pressure, flung herself from the bed, and, as respiration returned, cried with all her force for help.



## CHAPTER X.

IGNORANT of what had occurred in Edith's room before her cry for help, I paced my room, thinking how terrible the fright must have been that made her faint a second time, and despite her belief in the unreality of these mysterious appearances.

"Your turn will come," Van Hoeck had said to me, and these words coming back to my mind, I asked myself if the repeated attacks upon Edith might not be part of a complicated scheme to obtain the diamond.

Such a plot was the more possible because it seemed impossible. An act of legerdemain succeeds or not, according to the skill with which the conjurer fixes our attention on a false train of operations while he works out the actual feat. As I made these reflections, I took the Great Hesper from the pouch on my waist strap, and buckled it in its case upon my left wrist; then I doubly locked the door, saw that there was oil in the lamp, put a box of wax matches beside it on the table, and finally opened the long-bladed knife Van Hoeck had given me, and stuck it between the mattress and the side of the bedstead.

The room was thickly carpeted and oak-panelled. The furniture—with the exception of the toilet arrangements and a low, saddle-backed chair—was antique and of oak. The bedstead was particularly wide, with four carved pillars carrying a baldaquin and heavy curtains of some thick brocaded stuff, looped at the foot, but hanging loose at the head; it faced the oriel.

Between the right side of the bed and the wall was a square table—on which stood the lamp—with the saddle-back chair beside it. On the left-hand side of the bed



was a tall carved black press. A large chimney, with a sculptured mantel and an open hearth, faced the door. A screen shut off the wash-stand, which stood to the left of the oriel. A broad settle with a valance, and covered with a stuff similar to the hangings of the bed, ran round the three-sided recess formed by the window—curtains of the same kind shut off this recess. A corner cabinet, with folding-doors in the lower part, fitted the angle of the walls to the right; between this and the door was a deep, wide, and long chest, and above it a large mirror. An escritoire, some high-backed chairs, and a second table, completed the furniture. There was no door but the one opening upon the corridor, and no window save the oriel.

In the early part of the night I had described these particulars to Van Hoeck, at his request, and he had made me examine the press, the old chest, the hangings of the bed and settles; everything, in fact, which might afford a hiding-place to Lola or another.

I had even gone down upon my knees, and looked under the bed, to appease his anxiety. And yet now a vague uneasiness possessed me as I raised the lamp-shade, and looked round the room. The dark oak wainscot, the sombre hangings, the painted ceiling overhead, absorbed the light; there was a black void on the opposite side of the bed, where the light from the lamp was intercepted by the curtains; I could not see even the outline of the great press.

I readjusted the shade, turned the wick higher, and, half-undressed, threw myself upon the bed. I was not afraid—in strength I was a match for any natural foe, and I did not believe in the existence of any other—yet I felt myself infected with Van Hoeck's presentiment of impending calamity.



Van Hoeck's theory of Lola's complicity in a plot to steal the diamond, had been upset by the fact that I was watching her asleep at my door at the very time Edith believed she saw the girl looking through the blinds ; but this had in nowise shaken his conviction that the mysterious appearance was connected with the scheme to rob us.

"Are a man's convictions to be limited by his senses?" he asked. "You are convinced that a cloud is rising in the horizon because you see it, but am I to deny its existence because I have no sight? Are you justified, then, in declaring that we are not menaced by this disaster which is to overwhelm us because you have not my faculty of prevision? You who cannot deny prescience to a bee, the presentiment of coming storm to cattle, tell me that my conviction is nothing. It is only by conviction that we live. What saves us from destruction but the conviction that, by stepping into an abyss, we must fall? I tell you to look about you; we are on the edge of an abyss. There are signs to strike the dullest intelligence. Your turn will come!"

I had hung my watch in the pocket upon the hanging at the head of the bed; its lively ticking sounded strangely out of keeping with the gloom and stillness of the surroundings. The shaded light gave a funereal aspect to the bed-hangings; the baldaquin over my head might have been a catafalque for the dead. I wondered how many men had ended their days on this bed since those hangings had been put up. Would Van Hoeck's presentiment be fulfilled? Should I be found there in the morning dead?

It was well suited for a murder that bed, with its pall-like hangings to conceal the lurking murderer.

Tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac.



My ear had become so familiar to the brisk movement of my watch that the slightest sound was audible above it. And a sound, slight indeed, I heard.

To my mind, dwelling then upon assassins, it sounded like the drawing of a dagger from its sheath.

Turning my head toward the side from which the sound seemed to proceed, I fancied I saw the heavy curtain move: it was between me and the lamp. The movement was as slight as the sound. If it was a fact that I heard one, it was a fact that I saw the other.

I drew myself up gradually, and, leaning forward, I suddenly flung back the curtain with my left hand. There was no resistance to my hand; nothing to be seen beyond but the lamp burning steadily on the table, the saddle-back chair, and the dim outline of the big chimney-piece.

I got upon my knees, and pushed the curtain flat against the wall, to be sure that there could by no possibility be anyone concealed in the heavy folds—to assure myself that my suspicion was utterly without foundation.

This end of the room was comparatively light, and the saddle-back chair was so placed as to preclude the possibility of any one hiding beyond it.

If the curtain had indeed moved, it must have been by a hand from under the bed. It was easier to believe that I had been mistaken in seeing the slight movement than to suppose that I had overlooked a concealed thief when I looked under the bed to satisfy Van Hoeck; so I let the curtain fall, and lay down again.

My thoughts still dwelt upon the idea of assassination. Setting aside the idea of an intrigue in which Lola was concerned, there was yet nothing preposterous in Van Hoeck's presentiment. There were eight or ten servants in the house, and undoubtedly every one of them knew of



the marvellous treasure in my keeping. They would tell their friends in the adjacent village, the keepers, the tradespeople—in a few days the story would be carried about and made known to hundreds; and was there none among them whose cupidity might take practical form?

It was quite possible that under this very roof there was one with the ingenuity and daring to plan and execute the robbery. A servant intimately acquainted with the arrangement of the rooms and the peculiarities of the building would probably know of the external means of communication between the bay and the oriel windows. Without this knowledge, no one, it seemed to me, would dare to attempt that hazardous passage at night and in the dark; but with that knowledge, and possibly some previous practice, the feat was sufficiently practicable. In that case, Edith might actually have heard and seen what she had since attributed to imagination.

But what end could be served by these repeated attacks upon her sensibility?

A cause is sometimes discovered by examining the effect. Now, what effect had been produced by these attacks? The first had frightened Edith excessively; the second had made a slighter impression—thus far the effect had been confined to her; but the third—for only to a third fright could I attribute her scream of terror—had brought her father and myself from our rooms. Instantly, something like the truth flashed upon my mind:

To bring me from my room was the very object with which the attack upon Edith had been made.

Unriddling the mystery with this key, I assumed that the thief had watched me close the door upon Van Hoeck and return to my room; that, after allowing me sufficient time to get into bed, but not to fall into sound sleep, he



had made the attack upon Edith, opening her door beforehand to provide a speedy means of escape and to allow her cry to be more distinctly heard; that, having succeeded in terrifying her, he had sped down the stairs in the left block, passed through the library and dining-room, and ascended by the stairs in the right block about the same time that I might be supposed to have reached Edith's room, and that, reckoning upon my keeping the Great Hesper under my pillow, and leaving it there in my alarm upon Edith's account, he had expected to have possessed himself of our treasure. If what I thus assumed was the fact, then, indeed, this plan might have succeeded but for Van Hoeck's prudent insistence upon my strapping the diamond to my wrist.

As I thus explained what had happened, a more startling reflection occurred to my mind. The thief had been disappointed in not finding the diamond beneath my pillow, but he yet might not have relinquished the hope of getting it.

He might not have left the room. He might be hidden there at that very moment!

What was more easy, being in the room, than to conceal himself in it? The curtain that masked the oriel, the great chest, the settle, the press, were all suggestive of that course. The fellow might be under the very bed I was lying upon!

The movement I had seen in the curtain, the sound similar to the drawing of a blade from its sheath (which might well have been caused by the movement of the heavy valance of the bed), strengthened the suspicion. Was he lying there, waiting for the sound of my heavy breathing to assure him that I slept?

There was scarcely the necessity to wait for that, for



what resistance could I, lying upon my back there, make against a foe springing out of the dark upon me?"

I thought of the clasp-knife Van Hoeck had given me, and, stretching out my hand, I felt for it where I had struck it—between the mattress and the bedstead. I could not find it.

Pushing back the curtains so that the light from the lamp fell upon the edge of the bedstead, I assured myself that it was not where I had left it. It must have slipped through—or been drawn out.

The latter supposition explained the sound and movement I had heard and seen. Yet it might have made that sound in slipping through—its fall upon the floor deadened by the carpet, on its point sticking in the boards; but I fancied the horn handle was too wide to allow of its slipping through.

To satisfy myself at once upon this point, I leaped out of bed, resolved to strike a match and look under the valance. I stood for a moment stupefied: the box of vestas was gone from the table where I was certain I had laid them.

They must have been taken while I lay screened by the bed-curtains.

I glanced over my shoulder.

The folds of the curtain against the bed were not the same as when I pushed them back to the wall; one fold stood out at an angle; and as, slowly turning round, I looked more closely, I saw against the dark oak panel of the wall, about the mid-height of a man, and protruding but an inch or so from the edge of the curtain, the bright point of a knife-blade.

Now, indeed, there was no longer any doubt. The man who had come to rob was there to murder me. Had I



stopped but another moment on the bed he might have knifed me.

What was I to do? I had him standing there behind the curtain at a certain advantage.

Should I spring upon him and strangle him against the wall in the folds of the curtain?

It was not a sure victory for me, and a partial one might in the end be fatal. The thick stuff would prevent my getting a firm grip of him, and his right hand, the one that held the knife, was free. My chance was too small, the danger too great to justify that attack, though the muscles of my arms and fingers were strung up to make the tempting effort.

Keeping my eye upon the curtain, I drew back to the foot of the bed. To get to the door I must cross the room, and inevitably be seen by the murderous rascal as he stood there on the inner side of the bed-curtain; and, arrived at the door, I must turn the key twice, and the handle as well, before he overtook me. On the other hand he had to disengage himself from the folds of the curtain and recover the start I had of him.

The chances were pretty equal, and I determined to save myself by flight rather than risk the fatal result of the unequal encounter.

I made my way noiselessly in a straight line down the room until I got opposite the door, then I made a rush for it across the open space. I got to the door, and with furious haste groped about for the key—it was gone!

I grasped the handle, in the hope that I might be able to tear the lock off; the screw had been taken out, and the knob slid off the spindle in my hand. I was lost.

It astonishes me now to think with what celerity and, adroitness these precautions against my escape had been made.



The man had not rushed after me ; there was no desperate pursuit of that kind ; he knew I was trapped. Only as I turned my eyes back to the place where he stood, I perceived that the light was dying out.

There was but a narrow row of blue flame above the wick ; it faded away, and all was dark.

There are degrees of darkness : this seemed to me the last degree. I felt as if I was sunk in a lake of pitch.

If I called for help, it was not certain that the heavy-sleeping Judge would hear me. Possibly Sir Edmund was yet awake, but I thought of Edith, and besides I knew that before assistance could come, before the door could be burst, all would be over.

Probably my foe was already approaching me ; my cry would be the signal for him to spring upon me.

No, my only chance of escape was in maintaining silence, and keeping him in ignorance of my position. If accident brought us into contact, I trusted to my physical strength and good luck to be a match for him and his knife in the subsequent struggle. The diamond buckled to my wrist might serve me in the fight ; I might stun the fellow with it if fortune only favored my arm.

It was a duel between us, and any way, I would sell my life dearly.

With this resolve, I drew away from the door toward that part of the room where, as I fancied, the carved press stood. I kept my arms free, my body crouched together, and every muscle tense and ready.

I backed a few feet from the door, and then I stopped, as the reflection crossed my mind that I might be backing toward my adversary ! Then I regretted that I had left the door, where at least I might have stood safe from a rear attack.



I could hear nothing but the throbbing of the blood in my temples and the quick tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac of my watch behind me, yet I knew that the murderer must be moving.

He had his work to do, and must have made up his mind how to do it before putting out the light. I could see nothing, and the silence and darkness were horrible, with the possibility of his falling upon me from behind. Yet how was I to guard against that attack, not knowing where he was? Possibly his visual power was stronger than mine.

I knew by the ticking of my watch that the bed was somewhere behind me, and that I ought to be facing the oriel; and as I strained my eyes to catch any rays of light that might exist, I fancied I detected a dim gray seam in the blackness before me—possibly the curtains masking the oriel were slightly parted.

As I continued to stare in that direction, I became convinced that this was the fact, and slight though the assurance was, it gave me some feeling of security; in that direction I might know of my foe's approach. And, sure enough, at that very moment the gray seam was blocked out.

He was there, between me and the oriel. My first impulse was to end the terrible suspense, and spring forward upon him; but prudence checked me.

He might be close to me, or he might be close to the oriel—it was impossible for me to tell merely by the absence of a faint light. If, in springing forward, I fell short of him, it would be all over with me. My force expended in the spring, he would have me at his mercy, and a short death was the only kind of mercy I had to expect. Again, what feeble light there was must fall upon



me, as I faced it—an advantage for him, a terrible peril for me.

I resolved to back toward the wall at the upper end of the room, and guided still by the ticking of my watch, I drew back with the stealthy caution of a cat.

Suddenly I saw the gray seam of light again. Had he gone to the right or left? I knew not. Quickly I stretched my foot out behind me; I felt something, and for the instant thought I had touched the fellow, but, as turning about I groped my hand forward, I encountered the cold wood-work of the bedstead. It was one of the carved pillars. I drew myself up, and put my back against it. Now, at least, that dreaded stab in the back was less probable.

I am not a coward, yet I own that the terror of the following minutes thrills me now as I look back upon it. The impenetrable darkness, the silence rendered only more intense by contact with the perpetual tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac of the watch behind me, were made terrific by the awful uncertainty of my position.

I stood there waiting for the attack, until, the suspense growing intolerable, I felt that I must end it by shouting aloud to Brace, and precipitating the final struggle.

“I will wait five minutes longer, and no more,” I said to myself, resolving to calculate the space fairly, and with due allowance for false impressions. I calculated that two minutes had passed, when I fancied I heard the bed creak behind me. Was this one of the false impressions I had promised myself to guard against, or was the sound caused by the man mounting upon the bed behind me?

The hair bristled upon my head as I thought I heard the creak repeated; yet I stood there, and counted



another minute, with every nerve and fibre prepared to spring away.

“Now, surely four minutes are up,” I thought, and drew my head down into my shoulders, for, as surely as if my eyes had been turned that way, and the full light of the sun shining in the room, I *knew* that the man was behind me on the bed.

I drew a deep inspiration, resolved to shout my loudest to Brace, but before the sound had passed my lips a towel was drawn tight upon my face, and my head jerked back against the post behind me. A fold of the towel gagged me completely; it was with difficulty I breathed. I struggled, but in vain, to wrench myself away; a quick and sure hand had knotted the towel. I threw up my hands to tear the thing off; in an instant they were enveloped in the thick curtains, and though the fellow had not sufficient strength to tie them down to my side, he at least baffled my attempts to free my head. I drew my feet from the ground, hoping that my weight would drag my head from the towel; I only succeeded in drawing the knots tighter, and half strangling myself.

As I could not release my head, I got my arms down, and tried to seize the rascal's feet, but he kept them beyond my reach; yet I got something by the attempt, for, in groping about, I laid my hand upon the knife which he had thrust in the bed, to have free use of his hands, the better to overcome the resistance of my arms. I should have had no hesitation in ham-stringing the rascal if I could have got at his legs, but as I could not do that, I determined, if possible, to keep the knife out of his way.

I felt, by the horn handle, that it was the one Van Hoeck had given me; and, knowing the trick of the blade, I shut it up, and slipped it into my pocket.



“Now,” thought I, “if only thews and sinews are concerned, we will see who can get the best of it.”

And with redoubled efforts, I struggled to tear down the bed-curtains that hampered my movements; and, maddened by the difficulty of respiration, I threw such force into my efforts, that the pole upon which they hung crunched under the rings, and finally came rattling down about us. Would that the lamp had been near, to be smashed by the fall! The noise was too slight to be heard at a distance.

My left hand being free, I felt again for the knot of the towel that bound me to the post. A bony hand grasped my wrist, and dragged it over my shoulder, and the next moment I felt something pressed under my nose, and a liquid trickling through my mustache on to my lips. It had a sweet taste, and a strong smell of apples, that mounted at once to my brain. I seemed to be no longer touching the ground, but whirling round and round through space; my arms dropped by my side.

I knew that I was powerless, yet I retained a certain kind of consciousness. I was sensible that the difficulty of breathing no longer troubled me. I knew that the man was binding my arms to the post, and I remember thinking, in the bemused manner of a half-intoxicated person, what a fool he must be to bind me when I could no longer make resistance. I was perfectly conscious when he began to tie my feet to the post below, for I had then sufficiently overcome the effect of the opiate to think of resistance. I tried to struggle and to scream, but to no purpose: my will had lost all power over my muscle. And this terrible impotency reminded me of Van Hoeck's half-uttered simile: “Cramped in a coffin, and the clods falling—falling!”



What astonished me was the surprising facility with which the man executed his work in the darkness that then prevailed. He seemed to have no difficulty at all in finding the ends of the sheets with which he bound me, and knotting them securely. And when I was safely pinned, he unbuckled the strap that bound the Great Hesper to my wrist, without having to seek for the tongue of the strap, as I myself might have had to do.

"Well, that's gone," I said to myself; "and, now he has the diamond, he will go too."

But he had not yet finished. And after a brief interval, during which he might have been buckling the Great Hesper upon his own wrist, I heard a sound that I knew only too well.

Click!

It was the spring that locked the long blade of my clasp-knife when it was opened.

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## CHAPTER XI.

THAT sound warned me that the end was near. Not content with taking the diamond, the scoundrel intended to have my life—to remove the possibility, if possibility existed, of being identified as the thief by me.

He set about his work with devilish circumspection. I heard the metal rings clink as he took up the fallen curtain from the floor and folded it, and the bed creaked as he got upon it. As he approached from behind, he steadied himself by setting one hand upon my shoulder. Then he laid the folded curtain over my other shoulder, and his bony knuckles touched my chest as he arranged



the stuff over my breast. I knew what that meant: it was to prevent the betraying blood from spurting upon his arm.

In the pause that followed, I fancied he must be turning up his sleeve, as a butcher does who has a beast to slaughter.

A thousand thoughts whirled through my mind in that brief space; but a great awe came upon me as I felt his hand firmly grasp my left shoulder, for then I realized that I was on the very brink of eternity.

A feeling of regret for the ill use I had made of many days—for the loss of Edith, and the world which she had filled with joy and hope; a deep and tender wish for her happiness, and the welfare of the companions who had toiled with me to win the Hesper, took the place of terror, and it was with something like resignation that I awaited death.

As he grasped my left shoulder, I felt him lean over my right, and the next moment he stabbed me.

He had not used sufficient force, for the knife-point stuck in one of the ribs under my left breast, and went no further.

He pulled the knife out and tried again, but this time the blade scarcely punctured my skin.

Then seeing that the thickness of the doubled curtain was too great an impediment, he unfolded and rearranged it, passing his hand over my breast and pressing his fingers here and there to ascertain whether he had got it right for his purpose. It was then that, my nature revolting against this barbarous refinement of cruelty, I prayed like Samson for strength, and made one more effort to break my bonds.

The twisted sheets and firm knots withstood the strain, but the effort saved my life. The calculating villain knew



that I must exhaust my strength in a few minutes, and would not risk breaking his knife, or getting smeared with my blood as I writhed.

And presently my force gave out, and, all hope leaving me, I ceased to struggle, and was callous to his touch, when he once more touched my shoulder.

But in that moment of dread silence, when his knife must have been raised to strike the final blow, the door-handle turned, and I felt his grasp relax—nay, his fingers tremble as they lay on my shoulder.

There was an interval of a minute, and the door-handle turned again; then a voice, that I recognized as Lola's, spoke in a low tone outside.

"Are you there—you?" A moment's pause, and she added, "You ain't sick, are you?"

She had come to my door and heard me writhing against the post.

What would the rascal do now? his hand still trembled. It gave me courage, for it showed that he feared discovery, and I knew he would not risk his own neck for the mere pleasure of killing me. I put out my strength again, making the bed-post snap under my strain.

"Shall I sing out?" Lola asked, a little louder and with an accent of alarm.

The hand slipped from my shoulder and down my arm as the villain stepped from the bed. His position was getting more perilous. If Lola "sung out" there would be little chance of his making off with the diamond.

I had loosened the towel that bound my head and gagged me. I wriggled about furiously, worked the fold out of my mouth, and got my chin above it, breathing freely for the first time since I had been tied up. At the same moment I heard the key turn in the door, and I



knew that the murderer intended to let Lola in and silence her.

“Take care, take care!” I shouted, as loudly as the towel that still covered my face would permit.

Another wriggle, and I felt that the upper part of my face was uncovered. Moreover, I distinguished a long gray patch before me. The curtain of the oriel had been drawn back; the light had sensibly increased during the time occupied by the events I have narrated.

I almost fancied I saw the silhouette of a man’s figure against the grayness. It moved, and I was sure that my eyes were not deceived; it disappeared, and almost immediately afterward I heard a fall upon the terrace below. The man had dropped down a distance of fifteen feet from the window—a drop of not more than six feet for an ordinary man hanging from the ledge.

The feeling of relief, combined with exhaustion caused by my frantic efforts, was too much for me. I was giddy and sick, my eyes closed, the sweat stood cold upon my face, every muscle gave way and quivered, only the bonds upon my body kept me from falling.

“Y’ain’t hurt, are you, dear?” were the first words I heard. It was Lola’s voice, very gentle and tremulous.

“No; you have saved me,” said I.

She gave a little moan of delight, and her hands, which had been busily tugging at the knots, stopped in their work.

She threw her arms about my neck, and, pressing her face against my breast, sobbed.



## CHAPTER XII.

BRACE's door was unlocked. He to all appearance was sound asleep with his face to the wall. I shook him, and as he turned over I said :

"Get up ; the Hesper is lost."

"Lost ! as how ?" he asked, sitting up.

"Stolen—taken from me."

"Where's Israel ?"

I told him of Van Hoeck's terrible presentiment, and the circumstances under which he had left the house.

"We will find him, pardner," said the Judge, in his slow, sententious manner, which was queerly at variance with his speed in hurrying into his clothes. "We will find him, and see if his presentiments will go so far as fur to explain what's become of the diamond. Let up what has happened, pardner. Reel it off. I am all awake."

I narrated briefly the events of the night while he completed dressing. Lola, standing by the window, listened in silence. There was just enough light to reveal the mischievous exultation that sparkled in her eyes.

"Here's a Vigilance Committee job, if ever there was one," said the Judge, hastily lacing his boot. "I ain't lighted on anything so much like Californey since the good old days. Now, sir, if you air ready, we'll hunt up Israel, the prophet. He's got to tell us sumthin' more about this than we know on."

It was striking five when we quitted the house. The Judge left me to look about the garden and its vicinity for Van Hoeck ; he himself struck out at once for the wood, taking Lola with him. The girl would have stayed



with me, but her father had her hand in his, and there was no getting away from that grip.

After exploring the garden, I took the path that led to the lodge, as being one that Van Hoeck frequently walked in when alone. The lodge-keeper was not up, but, passing through the open wicket into the road, I came upon a laborer, trudging along to his work with a pick upon his shoulder, and a tin flask in his hand.

It then was half past five, or perhaps a little later.

"Have you passed a blind gentleman on the road?" I asked.

"I ain't passed 'im," he answered; "but as I come by the cross-roads I see some 'un, as looked gen'leman-like, kind 'er fumbling his way along the road down by Harley bottom."

I knew the cross-roads; they were nearly two miles distant. It was incomprehensible to me how Van Hoeck had strayed so far from the abbey; but the laborer's description left little room for doubt that it was Van Hoeck he had seen, and I started at once in the direction indicated.

I could not see Van Hoeck from the cross-roads, but on turning the angle of the lane at the foot of the hill, I perceived him feeling the way with painful slowness, and on the side of the hedge-row, a hundred yards in advance. Hearing my step, he turned, and recognizing it, came to meet me. He seemed to forget the danger of making a false step, and advanced with eager quickness—his whole body partaking the expression of anxiety imprinted on his features.

"Is it you, Thorne?" he called.

"Yes," I replied.

"What has happened?"



I waited until I got up to him, then putting my hand on his shoulder, I said :

“ I have bad news for you, Van Hoeck.”

He trembled violently under my hand, and opened his lips to speak, but no sound came ; his condition was pitiable, and to keep him no longer in suspense, I said :

“ I have lost it. It has been taken from me.”

“ Who has taken it ? ” he asked, in a thick, husky voice.

“ I cannot say. I could not see the man who robbed me.”

He was silent for a time, and then his feelings found expression, at first in execration then in incoherent sentences, broken up with words of Dutch where the English tongue failed to give sufficient force to his anger and mortification. He assailed me with every kind of invective, accused me of cowardice, of complicity in robbing him, of I know not what baseness and heartlessness—indeed, it seemed as though the blow had deprived him of reason for a moment. At length, when his passion was somewhat exhausted, he said :

“ And what is your defence ? ”

I took his arm, and as I led him up the hill toward the cross-roads, I went over the story once more. When I was telling him how Lola had come to my rescue, he stopped me.

“ That is a lie ! ” he said ; “ for she has been with me.”

“ Impossible ! ” I exclaimed.

“ Impossible, according to your story, but it is the truth for all that. I got off the path, and could not find my way back. She led me to a road—God knows where !—and left me.”

“ When ? ”

“ How can I tell ? The night has been an age.”



“Granting she led you for an hour—and you would scarcely suffer her to lead you longer—that would allow her to return to the abbey, and come to my rescue at the time I speak of.”

“Have it as you will ; it makes no difference now. She got me out of the way, and that was her object in being there. Go on.”

I came to the end of my narrative, and then suggested that the theft might be traced to one of the servants.

“Anything to shield Brace,” he said, bitterly ; and then, stamping his foot, he added, “You *know* he took it !”

It was useless reasoning with him in his present condition.

“You stand convicted by your own statement,” he continued ; “what ordinary thief would be fool enough, having obtained the diamond, to wait there, risking discovery and jeopardize his own life—for the sake of butchering you ? If Brace was the thief, such a thing is possible ; for he must kill both you and me to profit by the possession of the diamond. Where is he now ?”

“With Lola, in the woods looking for you.”

“What ? already !” he exclaimed, in alarm. “He is losing no time. Where are the woods ?”

“We are in them now,” I replied, for we had passed the cross-roads.

He stopped short. Shaking off my hand, he muttered, in a tone of dread :

“Are you three hunting together ?”

“Be reasonable, Van Hoeck,” I said.

“I am,” he replied ; “leave me here.”

I made no reply ; and we stood there in the middle of the road, he quaking with fear and turning his head from



side to side to catch the sound that might confirm his fears. He looked like a hunted beast, that knows not which way to escape the hounds.

"What's that?" he asked, under his breath quickly. "There's someone on the road. It's his step. If you have any mercy, save me from him."

While I was turning to look up the road, to see if his fears were justified, he groped about until he caught hold of my arm.

I had heard no sound, but his finer sense was not at fault. On the brow of the hill—which we were now descending—stood the gaunt figure of Brace. The light of the rising sun shone upon him, but we stood in the shadow of the wood, where the mist still hung over the sodden earth.

"I do not hear him; where is he now?" Van Hoeck whispered.

"He is standing on the hill, a couple of hundred yards behind us. He does not see us."

"If we could but get to the abbey! Forget what I said, Thorne. Have pity on me," he murmured.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Lead me back to the abbey. If I escape from that man now, I may protect myself after."

I saw no possible reason for refusing compliance with this request, and, taking his arm, I led him along that side of the road where the shade was deeper. But, before we had gone a dozen yards, a shrill whoop rang through the echoing woods to our right, and Van Hoeck again stopped. I looked in vain over the brake for Lola, whose cry I recognized; but, glancing up the road, I perceived that the Judge had heard the signal, and was coming after us. At the same moment Van Hoeck, starting forward, cried:



“Quick, quick—he sees us—he is coming down upon us!” and then, after another dozen yards, “do you want him to overtake us that you stick to this cursed road?”

“I am looking for a path; we cannot push through the brake,” I replied.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the Judge, his shoulders bent forward, his arms swinging from side to side, bearing down upon us with long strides, and rapidly diminishing the distance between us.

“He is gaining upon us. How far are we from the abbey?” asked Van Hoeck.

“Nearly two miles; we will run for it, if you like.”

We ran for some distance. Again looking back, I saw the Judge still plodding on, with the same rhythmic swing of his long arms. Running had given us no sensible advantage; Van Hoeck’s ear told him this. Drops of moisture stood on his livid face, the result of terror rather than exertion.

“There is no one in sight—no one we can call to for help?” he asked.

“No one. I see a footpath through the wood, if you think that will be safer.”

“Yes, yes—anything is better than this open road.”

We took the path I had caught sight of. It was a good sound bridle-way, covered with short turf; we ran along noiselessly. The angle we made shut off the view from the road. Brace could not cut off the corner without getting entangled in the undergrowth of briars interwoven with the tall brake.

He must follow in our steps to overtake us. The danger lay in the straightness of the path, which kept the view open from the road. Our escape depended upon our finding a by-path that might deceive him as to the course



we had taken. I explained this to Van Hoeck as we ran on.

"It is time we found one now if we are to escape," he answered.

The next step brought us to a footpath that cut the bridle-way at right angles.

Looking down the green alley toward the road, as we turned off from it, I could see nothing of the Judge. I thought we had beaten him.

But we advanced now with great difficulty. There was room only for one in the path, yet I had to keep hold of Van Hoeck's hand and guide him, for the brake met before us; the trailing brambles that crossed the path caught his feet; at every step he stumbled. It was hopeless to continue. Already I fancied I caught a glimpse through the trees of the Judge swinging along the bridle-way.

"Your only chance is to get among the brake, and throw yourself down while I go on," I said. "I can go quicker alone, and coming behind, he may imagine that you are still before me."

"Show me where to go."

I opened a way through the brake, led him behind a thicket, and bade him lie down. As he carried out this instruction, I got back into the footpath, and was then enabled to trot along at a brisk pace.

It was only just in time, for looking back a couple of minutes later, I perceived the Judge ploughing his way through brake and bramble, which came well up to the level of his breast, with as little difficulty as though it had been meadow-grass, and with the same steady swing of his bent shoulders. He had caught sight of me from the bridle-way, and struck out at once into the thick of the undergrowth.



I did not in the slightest degree participate in Van Hoeck's suspicions and fears, and having, as I hoped, succeeded in diverting from him the object of his dread, I was indifferent as to whether the Judge overtook me or not. Had I been in the humor to enjoy a joke, I think I should have enjoyed giving him a long chase for nothing; but circumstances were too grave for that. I pursued the path until it dipped down into a hollow, and there finding a fallen tree across the path, I sat down and waited for the Judge to come up. In a few minutes he stood before me with his arms folded on his chest, his feet planted apart, and a particularly stern look on his gaunt, weather-beaten face.

"He has given me the slip; has he given it to you likewise?" he asked.

"No," I replied; "I gave it to him. I helped him to escape."

"Stand up, Gentleman Thorne, and let us look each other in the face," he said.

I stood up. He held out his hand and I gave him mine.

"Now, standin' here hand in hand and face to face, say, air we the noblest works of natur' or air we not?"

I could not go so far as to admit that his appearance realized my highest ideal of nobility, but I understood his allusion, and replied:

"I believe you are an honest man, if that is what you mean, Brace."

"It is; and that is my opinion of you likewise. Let us sit down and hold a committee. Now, pardner, will you tell me why you let Israel git?"

"Because the poor wretch is half distracted with the loss of the diamond and his fear of you."

"Why do he fear me?"



"He believes that you took the diamond, and intend to have his life, in order to get the reversionary share, or something of that kind. And now, tell me why you pursued him when you saw he wished to avoid you?"

"Because he did so wish for one thing," and, he added, with emphasis, "because he's got to speak. Israel's got to speak," he repeated, with still greater decision. "A man what has presentiments as a thing is going to be took so accurate as hisn, must nat'rally have presentiments what's gone of it when it's took."

"And suppose he cannot tell you?"

"Well, then, he's got to try till he do. As a jedge, I've had to try a pretty considerable number of bad lots, but a more durned onprepossessing lot than Israel I never yet sentenced to a well airned gallus. End mark this, pardner: ef Israel was charged with this crime, and it was my duty to direc' the jury as to the verdic' they should well and truly find, I should direc' them to bring him in guilty, or I'd lock 'em up till they did."

"You are as unreasonable in your suspicions as Van Hoeck is in his, but you have not his excuse—you are not under the influence of fear."

"Because I hev nothing to be afeer'd on, Gentleman Thorne."

"Tell me how on earth it is possible for a man in Van Hoeck's condition—a man absolutely helpless, as we know him to be—to accomplish a feat of this kind?"

"I don't say he did it, pardner—I don't say he took the Great Hesper; on the other hand, I don't say he didn't. But I am free to maintain that he knows all about it. If you ask me how he knows it, I'd tell you as I don't know. There's a many things we don't know, but that's no reason why we shouldn't try fur to find out. We



ain't so everlasting clever that there's nothin' more to be larnt out of this almighty universe, take my word for it. And though we hev drawed a pretty good lot of truth out of the well, we ain't yet come to the last bucketful—not by a long way. One of the things we hev got to larn concerns Israel's presentiments, and," he added, emphatically, "I'm going to larn it."

"We must get back to the house. The police must be sent for."

"I don't see what harm they can do, and it's the reg'lar thing, and so they ought to be called in," he said, rising from the trunk on which we had been holding this discussion. "*I am going for Israel. So long!*"

I hesitated to separate from the Judge.

"You must promise me, Brace, not to commit violence on Van Hoeck."

"If you mean by violence taking of his life away, I will give you my word not to be violent with him. There's my hand on it."

On this understanding we shook hands and parted. He plunged again into the wood; I returned to the abbey. That was between seven and eight o'clock.

At two o'clock I went once more into the wood. Lola was wanted.

The police-officer from Southampton, on hearing my story, declared at once that the theft had been committed by a servant, and that Lola must be found at once, to know if she had seen the thief as he escaped by the window, and could identify him.

To find Lola, however, was not my sole object.

The protracted absence of Brace and Van Hoeck excited my misgivings, and, despite the Judge's promise, I



already reproached myself with having abandoned my blind partner. The Judge's notions of justice were peculiar, and based upon the rough usage of California miners in the days when they made and executed their own laws. I believed him capable of applying torture, only stopping short of actual murder, to wring from Van Hoeck the secret which he believed him to hold with respect to the lost diamond.

I retraced my steps to the spot where I had helped to conceal Van Hoeck. The broken brake marked a distinct trail, and in a pit less than a hundred yards from that point the undergrowth was beaten down, as if a struggle had taken place.

Was it not possible that Brace had gone further than he intended, and killed Van Hoeck? Had he concealed the body, and fled with his daughter to escape the consequences of his act?

Asking myself these questions, I followed a track from the pit that brought me into the bridle-way. Looking for further traces of a passage through the brake, I made my way down toward the road.

Again I perceived broken brake, and following the line, I threaded my way between the trees upon the slope of the hill until I emerged from the wood upon the high bank that edged the abbey road at that part. It was as nearly as possible the point where Van Hoeck had stopped me in the morning upon hearing Brace in our rear. Looking up the road, I saw the finger-post at the cross-roads; looking down, I saw that which took my breath away with amazement—Brace was trudging along the road toward the abbey, with Van Hoeck holding his arm on one side, and Lola his hand upon the other—an incomprehensible picture of unity, friendly assistance, and reliance.



It was true that without assistance Van Hoeck could not have found his way along the road, and very possible that, without the restraint of her father's hand, Lola would not have walked by his side; but all doubt as to the existence of a friendly understanding between the two men was dispelled from my mind by what followed.

Arrived opposite the bridle-path leading up into the wood they stopped, and consultation ensued between the two men. I could not hear their voices at that distance, but I saw by their gesticulations that they were discussing some point; it ended by Brace's going to the side of the road, and craning his neck to see if anyone were in sight. I crouched down beside the thicket, which partly concealed me.

When I cautiously raised my head and looked again, Brace, still standing opposite the bridle way, was drawing his arm out of the sandy bank that there skirted the road.

I ducked my head as once more he peered to the right and left. They were gone, all three, when I looked again.

When I thought it safe to venture, I went to the spot where Brace had stood. There was a rabbit-hole in the sandy cutting, partly hidden by the trailing growth from the overhanging edge. I took off my coat, turned back my sleeve, thrust in my arm, and drew out—*the leather case in which the diamond had been taken from my wrist!*

It was empty.

I again thrust my arm in and explored the hole, thinking—though it was little likely—that the diamond had slipped out of the case or been put in separately. It was a kind of cul-de-sac—the earth had fallen in from above and blocked the passage at less than the length of my arm from the entrance; but I did not give up the search until I was absolutely certain that the Great Hesper was not



there. It was not probable they would place the diamond in such an open place ; the leather case was different. It was unsafe to keep that, but it was of little consequence where they abandoned it. But why had they taken the diamond from the case, and what had they done with it ?

A clew to this mystery also I discovered before long.

When I got back to the abbey, Brace, Van Hoeck and Lola were in the library with the police-officer, Sir Edmund, Mr. Wray—his lawyer—and a couple of friends, justices of the peace, who had been brought by the rumors which were already widely spread.

Lola was still under examination. She was stubbornly silent. It was with the greatest difficulty that any response to the questions put could be drawn from her. But she admitted seeing the man drop from the oriel ; and, asked if it was one of the servants, she replied firmly, "No." But more than this could not be got out of her on this point.

To the inquiry how she had discovered the means of getting from the bay into the oriel, for it was by that way she had come to my assistance, she replied that she "had seen it done before," but she would not say whom she had seen.

The police-officer asked me to go into the adjoining dining-room with him.

"May I ask," he said, "if you have any reason to suspect that you have been robbed by your friends—your partners in the diamond ? because they profess to have been in the woods all the morning, whereas I have good cause to believe that they have been in the town of Southampton part of the time."

"Are you sure of that ?"

"I will take my oath that I saw the little savage in the red petticoat in the High Street as I started to come here."



## CHAPTER XIII.

"I ADVISE you, sir," said the officer, "to take the advice of Sir Edmund's solicitor, Mr. Wray."

I agreed, and he called in the lawyer. I told him, without reserve, all that had happened, showing him the leather case I had taken from the hole where Brace had placed it.

"A couple of cunning scoundrels!" he exclaimed; "their pretended suspicion of each other was, of course, intended to blind you to their complicity, while each, by implicating the other, diverted suspicion from himself."

"I was never in my life so completely deceived," I said. "Brace seemed to me the embodiment of rough honesty. I liked the man, and it was a painful shock to me when I found him unfaithful and a thief."

"He is worse than that, Mr. Thorne; he is a murderer at heart; for there can be no doubt it was he who attempted your life; it was a sheer impossibility for the other man to do it. We have heard the story of the robbery from Sir Edmund. The intelligence that planned the attack was doubtless Van Hoeck's. He looks like a man of subtle intellect. I do not see what other part he could have played in this affair."

"Sir Edmund told me, sir," said the officer, "that on your return from the left wing, you heard snoring in Brace's room."

"I certainly did."

"That could very well have been Van Hoeck, who had taken Brace's place while he slipped off into your room—another proof that the two were acting together."



"Precisely," said Mr. Wray; and then, with an air of business—"Well, now, what is to be done? that is the first question. The evidence is insufficient to charge either of the men even with being concerned in the robbery. The leather case proves nothing. They might declare they found it empty, and have concealed it through fear of accusation, or they might all three swear your statement to be false, and absolutely accuse you of being yourself the thief. And until we can substantiate the charge by positive proof, we must be careful to conceal our suspicions from them. If they think they are likely to be brought to justice, they will quit the country by the first steamer that leaves Southampton—and we cannot stop them. The thing that must be done at once is to search for the diamond. That is your affair," he said, addressing the officer; "undoubtedly they have placed it somewhere in Southampton, in readiness to take if flight becomes necessary."

"I'll have all the kens searched before the morning."

"That is part of your business, of course. At the same time, I would suggest that it is of far more importance to watch the men themselves. Van Hoeck would not trust the diamond to the keeping of ordinary thieves' receivers: it would be safer merely laid under a plant in the gardens down by the dock. You may be sure he has the ingenuity to suggest a safe place for its keeping."

"I'll have some plain-clothes men on the first thing tomorrow morning, and I'd better go and telegraph to Scotland Yard at once."

"As soon as possible. But, not to alarm the men, you had better make a pretence of continuing your investigations, and avail yourself of some plausible pretext for returning to Southampton. Everything at this moment de-



pend upon keeping Van Hoeck and Brace in ignorance of our suspicion. And with that view," he added, turning to me, "I counsel you, Mr. Thorne, to conceal your own feelings. Not one of these three ought to see any change in your demeanor toward them."

This was sound advice, and I recognized the importance of conforming with it; but I am the worst actor in the world where my feelings are concerned, and my very soul revolted against the men who had plotted together to take my life from the mere insensate greed of gain. I felt more bitterly toward Brace than toward his accomplice, not because I thought Van Hoeck less guilty, but because I had felt more kindly toward the Judge, to whom I seemed linked by the brotherhood of labor.

I kept out of his way when we returned to the library, and avoided looking at him, lest he should perceive that I was no longer his friend. But I knew he had his keen eyes upon me, and was reading the signs of my newly born aversion, and this made my acting worse.

When the officer had completed his investigation, he said sagaciously, as he closed his note-book:

"I have sufficient information for my present purpose. I may not be able to discover the perpetrators of this outrage and robbery immediately, but I think I shall be in a position to tell you something about the lost diamond within twenty-four hours."

Sir Edmund accompanied him to the door. When he returned and took the seat he had occupied at the head of the long table, Brace rose, and placing himself at the opposite end, inclined his head first to the baronet, then to the right and to the left.

"Squire and gen'lemen of this committee," he said, "I don't want to speak disrespect'ful of the police, but the in-



telligent officer who has just left us, as if he'd got hold of the tail end of a rocket, and meant follerin' it right up, and holdin' tight on till it bust, ain't goin' to do any good for hisself or anyone else in this business. The big diamond's lost, end he ain't goin' to find it in twenty-four hours, nor in twenty-four years. Ef it was a haystack, I don't say but what, with the help of Providence—and a good lot of it—he might be up to the job he's undertook. But it ain't a haystack. End ef he was to grind up the whole of this country, end every blessed thing upon it small, buddled it in a clean flume, and sifted the tailins careful, he wouldn't find it. End these bein' my views, it stands to reason that I ain't goin' to hang about here lookin' at the place where I've come to grief, like an old female what's slipped off the sidewalk on a bit of orange-peel. With your permission, squire, I'm goin' away right off."

"I cannot stop you, Brace, even if I wished to," replied Sir Edmund, who, be it observed, knew nothing of the suspicion against the Judge. "I am inclined to think that you will be happier in seeking a new fortune than in lingering about with the faint hope of recovering the old. If the diamond is found you will hear of it wherever you may be. Are you going to look for another diamond?"

"No, squire; I'm going to find *that*, please God," Brace replied; then, after a moment's pause, he said, "There's a matter of business to finish up before I go, sir: all the money I have in my pocket belongs to you."

"It is a loan; keep it, Brace—keep it until you are in a position to pay me; and I hope, for your sake, that time may not be far hence."

"You're grit, squire—real grit! I won't refuse your kindness. I shall need a bit to start with. But I'll ask you, sir, to hold this till I claim it."



He went round to Sir Edmund.

“What is it, Brace?” asked the Baronet, taking the paper Brace drew from his pocket. He found it was the Judge’s copy of agreement. “Oh, I do not need this, my good fellow,” he protested; “I have your I O U, and that is as good now as ever it was.”

“If you won’t keep it for your own security, squire, I’ll ask you to keep it for my own. It’s a kinder ce’tif’cate, and if anyone hes got anythin’ to say agen me when I’m not here to defend myself, I’ll ask you to let that up. Good-by, squire.”

He held out his hand, and said, as Sir Edmund shook it cordially—“Thank you, sir, thank you! You are grit!”

He strode down the room, brushing past Van Hoeck, who sat immovable and silent as though he were carved in stone, and came to where I was standing. My face must have told him that my heart was hardened. But he stretched out his hand and said hoarsely:

“Say good-by to us, pardner.”

I folded my arms and shook my head. He dropped his hand by his side.

“Prehaps you’re right,” he said, remorsefully, “prehaps you’re not. Time will show that I’ve got a clean conscience, if Heaven is just.” He paused, then in a still lower tone, and with an accent of reproach, he added, “Say yer hope so, pardner, say yer hope so.”

“I hope so,” I said.

He shook his head ruefully.

“’Tain’t yer old voice, Gentleman Thorne—there’s no heart in it. We’ve roughed it together, and we’ve shared our ’bacca out there, end”—his chin twitched convulsively, and turning away he muttered, “it takes all the pluck outer me to part like this.”



Lola was standing in a corner of the room by the door, with her eyes fixed upon me. As Brace was about to pass through on his way out he caught up her wrist savagely in his hand. As savagely she tore it away, and in her turn came and stood before me.

“I’m a-goin’,” she said.

“And a good riddance,” I thought, exasperated by the belief that she knew where the diamond was, and could reveal the whole mystery if she chose.

“You ain’t goin’ to let me go like him, are yer?” she asked; “you ain’t goin’ to let *me* go without sayin’ good-by?”

There was deep pathos in her voice. The friendless little savage loved me. She had saved my life. My heart smote me for forgetting that. I gave her my two hands; she drew them round her slight body, and then flinging her arms about my neck she whispered with tender impulsiveness:

“Shall I be good? Shall I tell you where it is?”

But just at that moment her fine ear caught the rustle of a woman’s dress, and catching sight of Edith, who was entering from the dining-room, she started back.

Scowling over her shoulder at Edith, her eyes aflame with hate, she said, in a voice from which all tenderness had gone:

“For her sake? No!” and without looking again at me she went from the room and joined her father.



## CHAPTER XIV.

My engagement with Edith was broken off that evening.

I had not the slightest hope of recovering the lost diamond, and when I told Sir Edmund my reasons for despairing, he did not attempt to conceal his satisfaction with regard to my determination.

“A man should never be dependent on his wife. It must necessarily be a source of humiliation to him; and no man suffers humiliation without in time losing his own self-respect. That will never, I hope, be your loss, Bernard. Poor girl, it will be a great grief to her; for though she has known you but a little while, she has found in you a great deal to admire and love, and her affection is so tenacious that I doubt if she will ever cease to love you.” He sighed, and for some moments sat in thoughtful silence; then he said, “We must not break her heart, my dear fellow—we must leave her some hope, as it is necessary that for some time you should be separated, it is right that you should both be free to form other engagements, at the same time there may be a tacit understanding that, should you succeed in making a position for yourself in a reasonable space of time, and then are both still warmly disposed toward each other, the engagement shall be renewed.

“There is no necessity for your having a large fortune, but it is essential, as I think, and as you happily think also, that you should be able to provide yourself with the necessities of life. I promise that Edith shall bring with her the luxuries.”

He then offered to use his influence in procuring me a secretaryship: but as I had never been accustomed to sedentary occupation, and such an appointment could



never satisfy my more ambitious hopes, he generously placed his purse at my disposal, to use as I might find occasion.

I have purposely abstained from dwelling upon my love affairs, for if I entered into them at all, my feelings would lead me to dilate upon the delights of my brief wooing, to the exclusion of the graver matters which form the subject of this book. For the same reason I shall pass over the bitter grief of our parting. I will only say that Edith's last words awakened courage in my sinking heart.

I could form no satisfactory theory with regard to the Great Hesper robbery, but I was disposed to regard Van Hoeck as the least culpable agent concerned in it.

It was impossible to tell how the robbery affected this mysterious man. As I have said, during the investigation he sat perfectly motionless and perfectly silent. His face wore the inscrutable expression of a death-mask.

Sir Edmund had no sympathy with him after learning from me the particulars relating to the adventures of the morning.

When we entered the library from the dining-room, where our interview had taken place, we found Van Hoeck sitting where we had left him.

"I have ordered the carriage to be at the door in half an hour, Mr. Van Hoeck," said the baronet. "Be good enough to make your arrangements for departure by that time."

Van Hoeck inclined his head.

"I shall be glad if you will redeem your I O U at an early date," the baronet added, sternly.

Van Hoeck put his hand in his pocket, drew out a purse, and extended it. I took it, seeing the baronet's repugnance, and placed it on the table.



I accompanied Van Hoeck to Southampton. Neither of us spoke on the way—indeed, I had not heard a word pass his lips since we parted in the early morning.

I took a room for him at an hotel, and when the servant who led us to it was gone, I said :

“ I am going to leave you, Van Hoeck.”

A gesture of indifference was his only reply.

“ You have nothing to say—no explanation to offer?” I asked.

“ What do you mean?—speak plainly,” he said.

“ I saw you discussing with Brace what should be done with the case that held the diamond before he secreted it.”

“ If you know that we were discussing that, you know all. It is useless to make an explanation that you would not believe. I have nothing to say.”

He groped his way to a chair and threw himself into it.

I put a packet of notes on the table, and told him that if he had need of further help he might write to me, addressing his letter to the care of Sir Edmund. Then I left him.

I had a vague idea of purchasing a partnership in some business where I could find active employment, and with this view I took lodgings in London, and began to look about me. I had been engaged in this pursuit about a week when I received a letter from Sir Edmund.

“ I enclose,” he wrote, “ a cutting from one of the weekly papers. Vine-growing, as it is here described, seems to be the very thing that should suit a man of your disposition and taste ; it would suit me, if I were thirty years younger than I am. As it is, nothing would better please me than to see you a prosperous fruit farmer.



“That Edith might have something to look forward to, I have proposed that our next summer holiday trip should be to San Diego. She thinks we should find Californian hotels insupportable. Perhaps you will be able to offer something more acceptable than hotel accommodation. In any case, my dear fellow, you can give me no more acceptable testimony of your affection than in availing yourself freely and fully of my pecuniary assistance.”

The cutting referred to vine-growing and fruit-culture in Southern California ; but before I read a single line in it I had made up my mind to be at San Diego to receive Edith and her father in the summer.

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## CHAPTER XV.

FORTUNE favored me ; before I had been twenty-four hours in San Diego, I learned that one of the best fruit farms in the State was to be sold. It lay in Elysium Valley, about twelve miles back of San Diego City, and was the property of Colonel Hinks. On hearing this, I hired a horse at once, and rode to the estate. The road ran between irrigated plantations of lemons, citrons, oranges, and other fruits that perfumed the air ; the higher slopes were covered with vines. In the distance before me were the snow-capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada, and turning in my saddle as I ascended the gentle rise on which the house stood, my eyes were dazzled with the beauty of San Diego Bay.

The house was large and well-built in the Italian style—a style not unsuited to that unclouded sky, and the surrounding scenery. The view from the belvedere was in-



describably beautiful, and indeed justified the high-sounding name given to the valley it overlooked.

There were flowers everywhere about and around the house ; they festooned the terrace fronting the façade ; they hung from the windows ; they edged the paths ; they even twined from bough to bough of the great cedar that lent shade to the lawn.

“ This is a house worthy of Edith,” I thought. “ Oh, that it may be mine to offer her ! ”

It would be time wasted to enter into my business transactions with Colonel Hinks. Suffice it to say that my ardent wish was realized, and that in less than a month from my arriving in San Diego I entered into possession of the beautiful property. Doubtless, it was a hazardous undertaking for one who knew nothing whatever of the business, but what hazard is too great for a man whose object is to win the woman he loves ? That the money I invested was not my own, did not lessen the risk I ran, but increased it ; for, unless I could show a reasonable probability of repaying Sir Edmund’s loan, I could not demand Edith’s hand. However, I had every reason to believe that Colonel Hinks was a gentleman, and an honest and conscientious man of business ; added to this, I had confidence in my own perseverance, energy, and strength, and that buoyant feeling of hope with which nearly everyone who breathes the healthful air of this delightful continent seems to be inspired.

Early in November I received a letter from Sir Edmund. Among other things he wrote :

“ The robbery is still a mystery—to me it is a greater mystery than ever. Van Hoeck has taken lodgings in the village. I have met him twice in the woods, a wild, de-



plorable object, and, indeed, pitiable, if one may doubt his complicity in the robbery. Once he was upon his hands and knees, groping among the ferns, as if he expected to find there the lost diamond; but he chooses the night for these expeditions—probably because he is then less open to observation. The keepers tell me that he passes the whole night, and every night, in this hopeless search. Why on earth should he do this, if he and Brace got possession of the diamond, as we suppose?"

In a postscript he added—"Mr. Furnival, dating from Haxel's Hotel, London, wrote asking me for your address. I replied that you were at San Diego, California."

The news with regard to Van Hoeck did not add greatly to the mystery in which this strange man was already involved; but the postscript was a new source of perplexity to me. I knew no one of the name of Furnival; I could not recollect having spoken to anyone of Sir Edmund while I was in London.

How then, could this Mr. Furnival have known where to apply for my address? I expected a letter from him to clear up this matter, but no letter came.

A few days later I received a letter addressed to me at Monken Abbey, and readdressed in Sir Edmund's hand. Turning to the signature I found it was from Brace. It was dated October 15th, Petersville, Nevada County. The Judge then was in California, within a day's journey of me. I was not surprised at this, knowing his partiality for the State; but it was irreconcilable with the supposition that he and Van Hoeck had the diamond. He wrote thus:

"I rite these lines fur to show where I am lokated, and likewise that I have not slinked off like a thief in the night



to hide my lights under a bushel. If things aint no for-arder than they was in the direction of clearin up what's become of the Great Hesper, they aint anyways no back-arder.

"It aint no use promisin without you are got it right inter yer to perform, but I will allow that I aint goin to chuck up the cards before Ive made you shake my hand and acknowledge Ive played square. The Kid is frettin and things in genal is not lively with your pardner,

"JOS. BRACE."

I did not reply to this letter. I heard again from Sir Edmund at the end of November. His letter was dated the 20th. He felicitated me heartily upon the purchase I had made, and added the warmest wishes for my success.

He continued.

"Thank you for Brace's letter. The tone of it would lead one to imagine not only that he knows where the diamond is, but has a strong belief in his power to recover it! One cannot possibly believe that it was he who robbed and attempted to murder you. But whom are we to suspect, if not him? If he were not guilty, why should he try to conceal the leather case which might lead to its recovery? There is a fascination in this subject which overcomes my wish to drop it. It is like the fifteen puzzle that drove half the world mad some years ago.

"Van Hoeck still wanders about the woods through the night. More than once he has been seen standing outside the room in which Edith and I pass the evening, listening.

"His suspicions have perhaps fallen upon us. The poor wretch may have lost his reason. His appearance,



when I caught sight of him the other day, justifies the suspicion.

"I have to confess to an indiscretion which may have no serious result, but which I regret all the same. Yesterday I received a telegram from Furnival, dated Haxel's Hotel.

"It ran thus :

" ' We have important clew. Send address of Joseph Brace at once, or place where he is likely to be found.' "

"The ' we ' led me to suppose that he was an agent of the detectives employed in this case, and without further reflection I sent Brace's address, having your letter under my hand. I became uneasy as soon as the messenger was out of sight, and sent Wilson over to Southampton with two telegrams, one for Furnival and the other for the head of the detective department, asking for further particulars. I have received no reply whatever from Furnival, and the detectives replied by letter that they employed no one named Furnival, and that all inquiries were made through the head office.

"Who on earth can this Furnival be, and what can be the object of his inquiries ? The mystery was sufficiently incomprehensible without this addition."

Incomprehensible indeed, and the more closely one examined the mystery, the more inscrutable it appeared.

"I enclose," he wrote, in conclusion, "a letter which came to hand this morning."

It was a second letter from Brace. This is the copy :



"TIBBALS'S GOLDEN STATE HOTEL,  
"SACRAMENTO CITY, November 8.

"GENTLEMAN THORNE, SIR: I dint expec you to answer my letter, but the Kid have took it to heart moren natral. I told you she was kinder frettin, and to please her I made believe I had sent the message she ast me to rite. Which gettin no anser to said message she sorter felt youd turned your back on her for ever. I dont think shes goin to make old bones. Seems to me like as if she meant knocking off early. Ses she dont feel like gatherin any more wild flowers.

"The doctor considers that sickness she got out Africa has settled into her, and she cant corff it off.

"The rains hes set in early up Petersville, and they aint no good for a poor little sick Kid. We come down here day fore yesterday.

"Shes pinin, pardner, thats whats the matter with her, witch is why I rite her message.

"She says she wants to be good ; them's her words. I never knew her say such a thing, an I cant hardly expec you to believe it, knowin what she was, but if you could only see her as she is youd believe it. Shes that altered ; no tantrums, no opposishun, no obstinacy—no nothin.

"Seein this, you may be moved, sir, bein kinder pitiful by natar, to rite her a few words, jest to say youve got her message, and hope shell stick to her promise. With a little bit of encouragement like that, I dont think shed go away without telling us what shes done with the Great Hesper.

Yours respectfully,                      JOS BRACE."

I started for Sacramento without a moment's delay.



## CHAPTER XVI.

I WAS told at the Sacramento depot that the Golden State Hotel was on the third block up the grade. In ascending the hill, I caught sight of Brace and Lola walking in advance a hundred yards or so, yet so changed that it took me some minutes to identify them.

Swinging along at a good four miles an hour, and dragging the Kid along by the wrist, or letting her trot on behind, I should have recognized the Judge immediately at a quarter of a mile off. But walking at an old man's pace, with his daughter leaning on his arm, he was not easily recognizable.

But in Lola the change was still greater. She was no longer a barefooted, ragged little savage, but a young lady with some pretension to elegance in her dress; and thus altered, she looked a woman rather than a child.

Her head was bent, she leaned for support on her father's arm. She walked slowly, and with an air of fatigue; and, remembering the buoyant elasticity of her gait, the rebellious independence of her spirit, I asked myself with doubt if this could indeed be Lola.

I followed them into the hotel; from the vestibule I saw them enter a room upon the first floor. I ran up, and stopped at the open door. Lola had seated herself on a couch, her face rested on the pillow, her eyes were closed.

It was the pretty little face I knew so well, but oh, so changed! Her cheek was no longer round; the russet bloom had gone from her complexion; there was a purple tint about her closed lids, and the vermilion of her



lips was unnaturally bright. I was struck by the delicate beauty of her face, but it was a beauty that filled one's heart with sorrow, like the fading away of a divine melody.

I entered the room noiselessly, and seated myself in a chair by her side. I heard Brace moving about in the adjoining room. She was unconscious of my presence, and as I sat with my eyes dwelling upon her beautiful face, my thoughts wandered back to the old days at the Cape, when I left my work from time to time to see how "the little 'un" was getting on, as she lay exhausted with sickness. The gleam of the white teeth between the parted lips, the curl of the long lashes that swept her cheek, the crisp little lock above her ear—these were all the same, yet with the undefinable trait of womanhood, so different. The bud had opened—only to die? I had asked myself before if she would live. It was doubtful then, but the hope was fainter now.

She opened her eyes, and, seeing me, sprung up with a cry of joy, and threw her arms round my neck and kissed me, for she was, indeed, still a child at heart.

"Oh, it is true!" she cried, between her kisses; "I was asleep, and I saw you come to me, and—" she stopped abruptly, and drawing back, said in wonder, as she looked in my face, "Why, you are crying!"

Hearing her voice, Brace came in from the next room.

"Say, now, what did I tell you?" he exclaimed. "The Kid's took it into her silly little head as she wouldn't see you no more, sir."

"She will see a good deal of me, if I have my way," I said, holding out my hand to Brace.

His countenance changed; he dragged his chin tuft



thoughtfully for a minute, then turning to his daughter, he said :

“Lola, my gel, we must have it out now straight off. Here’s Gentleman Thorne holdin’ out his hand to me, and I ain’t no right to take it till you let on what’s come of the big diamond.”

“Not now—not now,” she said, beseechingly ; “a little while—a week—no more.”

“No, my gel ; ’tain’t to be put off like it was a dose of physic. See here—see here. When we parted, Gentleman Thorne refused to give me his hand—for why, he knew we wasn’t playin’ square ;” and, turning to me, he said, “You knew we’d got the stone, didn’t you, sir ?”

“I saw you hide the case,” I replied.

“Consequently you knew we’d got the thing among us somewheres. Come, my gel, think how Gentleman Thorne nussed you out there in the hot sun ; ’member how he stood by you and pulled you through. Don’t let the best friend you ever had think you ain’t got nothin’ but greaser blood in yer ; don’t let him think you ain’t got no kinder gratitude or ’fection in yer.”

“Oh, you shall not think that,” she cried, starting to her feet. “I’ll take you there—not to-day, it is too far ; but to-morrow I’ll show you where it is, and you shall take it to *her*, and never see me again.”

“I will take you with me if I go, Lola,” I said.

She shook her head, and covered her face with her hands.

“No, no, you will never see me again,” she said, and then a violent fit of coughing attacked her, and she left the room, closing the door after her.

Brace looked at me significantly, and in a low voice that faltered a little, said :



"It ain't nat'ral for her to give in like that; it ain't like the Kid, not a bit. Her contrariness and obstinacy used to make me wild, but it didn't make my heart ache like this."

Lola came back in a little while, weak and exhausted, but with a smile upon her poor face. She sat close to me slipping her hand under my arm, and resting her cheek against my shoulder. Her love was too innocent, or she was too ignorant of social usages, to know restraint.

"I don't want to talk: it hurts me," she said. "I just want to sit here quiet," and she closed her eyes, nestling still closer.

"You've come to a ruined and an onhallowed country, sir," said the Judge; "durned if I skercely knowed it again—nothing but machinery and Chinese—not a decent white placer in all Nevada—them yaller varmint ain't left anythin' worth lookin' for, not in the or'nary way. It's got to be looked for in onor'nary places, and fetched out in onor'nary ways, as I've said more'n once before to you; and my meanin' is that I could do the same if I had the means, and if so be the Kid keeps her promise—as I do believe she will." Lola nodded, without taking her head from my shoulder, or opening her eyes, and a little sigh fluttered up from her heart. "As I *know* she will—I'll do it; not for the sake of the gold, 'cause that won't be needed when we've got the diamond, but just to prove the prenceple of the thing. It's down an almighty hole up the Sierra, nearly up to the snow-line, and I've been there prospectin' it day after day, and studyin' the thing out, an' I didn't leave it till the snow forced us to come down, an' now the hole's blocked up for months."

Suddenly raising her head, and turning to her father, with eager eyes, Lola exclaimed:



“Blocked !”

“Ah, blocked for full three months by the snow, and for another by the swelled fall ; it’ll be pretty well June afore I kin get down it.”

Lola burst into a fit of hysterical laughter, and, clapping her hands with joy, cried :

“It is down there—the diamond ! You must wait—months—almost till June.” Then growing suddenly grave, she looked wistfully at me, as if to see if I were angry with her.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

NATURALLY they were astonished when they heard I had been in the State a couple of months. When I told them I had come there to seek my fortune, and was farming in the south, where I hoped they would come and stay with me during the winter, Brace said :

“Well, I hear there’s a livin’ to be made ranchin’, but it’s a plaguy long row, they *do* say. Howsoever, it won’t be none too long for me to hoe along of you, and so be you’re agreeable to havin’ our company, it ain’t likely I’ll hold off.”

Lola’s eyes dilated with eager delight. I fancy her imagination pictured a return of the Transvaal times, the happiest she had known, when rude necessity knit us together in close companionship. I did not think it necessary to undeceive them then, and the next day I took them with me to San Diego. The sun was shining when we got there, and the air was soft and warm : it was like an early day of English summer.



The effect on Lola was miraculous : she seemed inspired with new life. I had never seen her so animated and gay.

Her countenance fell as we passed through the beautiful plantations and entered the richly furnished house. It was an unhappy disillusion for her. Brace, who never let anything in the world surprise him, stroked his chin reflectively as he looked round him, and said :

“ This is your lot, is it, Gentleman Thorne ? ”

“ I shall be better able to call it mine when I have paid up the capital invested in it. As you know, I had no money of my own. I have borrowed heavily, and until the loan is paid——”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“ Until it’s paid,” said Brace, continuing my sentence. “ You’ve got to go to bed late, and get up airy, and be thankful hef you kin sleep sound in betwixt. I reckon it’ll take you a pretty considerable long time afore you feel you don’t know what to do with yourself.”

“ A long while ! ” I said, gravely.

“ How long ? ” asked Lola, quickly, under her breath.

“ Oh, many, many years, perhaps,” I replied.

She did not attempt to conceal her satisfaction.

I gave the girl a wiry little horse ; she sat it for the first time with the grace and mastery of a trained horsewoman.

Every morning I rode round the plantation ; sometimes business took me to the city—she never failed to be by my side on these occasions. But when I had work to do, it was another thing. She hated work, and dreaded tranquillity ; she found an escape from both in a wild gallop among the foot-hills. She became coquettish with regard to her appearance. When she could coax a dollar out of



her father, she would gallop off to San Diego to buy some trifle for the adornment of her pretty little person. If by my manner she fancied I approved the new addition, she wore it till she could replace it with something else; but if I failed to notice it, or she thought it was not to my taste, she would fling it away before it was a day old. She abandoned herself to the enjoyment of the new life that came to her, and for some time she seemed neither to remember the past nor to think of the future.

Under these conditions, all trace of illness disappeared, and with health returned something of her old mutinous independence; paternal authority once more sunk into insignificance.

Brace quickly found occupation, and after a time rendered me invaluable assistance in the management of the business. One day, as we were returning from the packing-sheds, he said:

“I’ve looked round this consarn pretty careful, and I see, sir, that you’re goin’ to do a great big thing here. You’ve found out jest where the real grit o’ this country lays, and you’re goin’ to work it up into an almighty pile. That’s what you’re goin’ to do, and I’m everlastin’ glad of it, for more reasons than one. And one reason is this—I’m gettin’ more duberous every day whether we shall ever get the Great Hesper. For, fustly, when the frost breaks up, the great hole where the gel hes hid the stone, may be swep out as clean as a gun-baril by the torrent of melted snow, or it may be blocked up for everlastin’ by the mast of rock that comes rollin’ down from the mountain sides every spring; and, secondly, the Kid may change her mind. She may back out of the promise she gave us when she was sick. Rec’lect her mother were a greaser, and consiquently it’s nat’ral to her to tell lies when they’ll



serve her purpose ; and bear in mind it would serve her purpose to make out the diamond ain't no longer where she put it. Bear in mind also, sir, as she warn't herself when she made the promise, and that she's been gettin' more herself since. Her obs'nacy and deviltry's comin' back more and more every day, and she's now almost the obs'nate, contrairy little cuss she was. Keep on bearin' in mind that she stole the diamond purposely to separate you from Miss Lascelles, and to bring you down to a or'nary workin'man again. I see her game the day we lost the diamond ; I see it clearer 'an ever when we got up to Petersville—she wus that angry when I told her there was no good to be done minin' in the or'nary way—so eager for me to write and tell you there was a going for the stuff down the big hole. Now, fortune to be made soon as I hit on the idea of what's she to git by givin' up the diamond—a little wuss than nothin'. Which is why I rejoice in the prospect of your making a big thing of this ere orange growin'. Still, sir, we ain't goin' to lose that diamond, if we can help it, and we're got two things to do. We're got to keep our eye on the snow, and get down the great hole afore the wust of the slush and rock comes tumblin' down, and we're got to make the Kid believe as things down here is so jolly flourishin' as we don't kere two straws whether we find the thing or not. You'll leave that to me. I'll pitch it in strong to her !”

And he kept his word. Every day he exhausted his stock of adjectives in glorifying the estate and dilating upon the marvellous results to be obtained from fruit culture, and occasionally he referred to the Great Hesper with such contempt that one would have thought it was hardly worth stretching out one's hand to take.

This had the effect that Brace desired. She listened in



moody silence, and after I had turned the subject, she would sit with her chin in her hands, her elbows on her knees, and her great sad eyes fixed upon some distant object, wrapped in dreamy meditation. But Brace was not content with this.

One day I overheard him speaking to Lola when they were alone.

“I reckon we shall have to show off our good pints, my gel, before the squire and his daughter come here, or we shall look pretty mean by comparison, and Gentleman Thorne will sorter feel sick, seein’ us hangin’ around. He’ll say to hisself, nat’ral like, well, here’s this squire and his daughter, as I’ve never done nothin’ in partickler for, has set me up in a business as is goin’ to make me the most eternal all-fired millionaire that ever lived; and, on the other hand, here’s this derved old Judge, as skercely earns his salt, and the Kid, as I’ve nussed and saved twice from dying right out, and all they’ve ever done for me is ter rob me of all I hed, and do their level best to clean me out and ruin me.”

He might have continued, being of a persevering sort, but that Lola ran away to her room, slammed the door, and burst into a fit of crying, that could be heard where I sat on the terrace.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

I HAD written a few hurried lines from Sacramento, telling Sir Edmund that Lola had taken the Great Hesper, and intended to restore it as soon as the snow had melted and allowed us to reach the cavern in which it was concealed. In answering this letter he wrote:



"After reading your good news, Edith and I went for a stroll through the park, where we encountered poor Van Hoeck, whose woe-begone appearance appealed once more to Edith's heart and mine also. 'Why,' she asked, 'should we any longer treat him as a possible scoundrel, now that the Braces admit having taken the diamond?' We turned back, overtook Van Hoeck, and told him what had happened. The poor wretch was overcome with emotion, not because of the possible recovery of the lost diamond (of which he entertains strong doubt), but in being once more treated as an honest man."

Now did Van Hoeck deserve to be treated as an honest man? That was the question. I will give here Brace's account of what occurred in the woods, and as near as I can in his own words.

"When we parted company in the wood," he said, "I hunted around for Israel, as was my intention, you will remember. I found him crawlin' like a varmint of a reptile through the ferns. I fetched him into a convenient spot, and says I, 'Israel,' I ses, 'you air goin' to prophesy what has gone of the Great Hesper. It's not a hard job, if you give yer mind to it. Tain't nothin' near so hard as prophesying what's goin' to be.'"

"I had hold on him by the arm. All of a suddent, he flings himself round, grapples on to me, and 'fore I'm aware of anythin', I'm on my back, and his two thumbs is inter my wind-pipe. I never thought he'd got it inter him—such strength and agility—and I'll allow he would have strangled me hef the Kid hadn't come up in the nick and frightened him by singing out for you. I did not lose any time, and when I had shown I was as strong as him,



with a little bit to spare, I got him to prophesy. He wanted a plaguy lot of perswadin', and he got it; but when he couldn't stand no more on it, he let on that it was inside of a rotten willer alongside a pond in the holler. I didn't know no pond, but I ketched sight of the Kid sneakin' off, end I jest sneaked after her, takin' Israel along case he mighter made a mistake in his jography. There was no walking fast with Israel over the brambles, end I lost sight of the Kid; but it stood to reason the holler was down hill, so down I went the way the Kid had gone, near as I could reckon, and there was the pond and the rotten willer as he had prophesied, and there at the foot of the willer was the empty case, but nairy diamond. I cocked my eye around, end once more I ketched sight of the Kid sneakin' off. I went for her nat'rally, but I might jest as well have went for a tom-tit. She got clean outer sight about the same time's I got outer wind. But Israel wouldn't give up, and we hunted about for the Kid till we couldn't neither of us hunt any more; then we sat down in committee, and, arter pretty warm discussion, we came to the unanimous conclusion that, for the sake of everyone concerned, we had better get rid of the leather case and say nothin' about it. I laid it down that the Kid had not took the diamond for mere mischief. She knew, in her own greaser way, that the thing had a power in it to bring happiness to the owner—like a charm. She see that it clothed us decent end lodged us comfortable, and that while it separated you and her, it brought you and squire's daughter together. And we laid it down mutual that the Kid had too much gum-tion to pitch the thing away, but would hide it somewhere where she could fetch it bimeby. Now, hef we'd done otherways what would have happened? Van Hoeck ud have declared it was all a lie, and wild horses wouldn'ter



dragged the secret out of the Kid. The only hope of gettin' back the Hesper was to let her play her game and watch her close."

A copy of this statement I sent to Sir Edmund, and I added :

"Either Van Hoeck is possessed of supernatural clairvoyance, or he must have been in complicity with the man who took the diamond from me.

"Can that man have been the 'Furnival' who obtained the address of Brace and myself from you?"

For my own part, I doubted Van Hoeck's innocence. Perhaps I may have been biased in forming an ill opinion of him by my jealous dislike of the relation he had formed with Edith. She was the only living creature Van Hoeck had spoken well of in my hearing; and I fancied that he was playing a hypocritical part to obtain the pleasure of her society and friendship.

By the return mail Sir Edmund wrote :

"I felt it right to read that part of your letter referring to the robbery to Van Hoeck, who for the last few weeks has been an accepted visitor here, and I may add the object of Edith's sympathetic commiseration. He declared upon his oath that there had been no struggle between himself and Brace, and that no statement had been extorted from him by the violent means indicated; that when you left he felt his way to the road, and waited there. Brace came and undertook to lead him home. He remembers stopping on the way while Brace asked him if he thought you had really been robbed of the dia-



mond. He knew nothing of the leather case, which Brace might well have concealed in the manner you describe without his perception. After this explanation, he said that he must once more relinquish our friendship until all doubt is cleared up. 'But,' he added emphatically, as he was about to leave us, 'if only a part of this story is true—if the girl got possession of the diamond, hid it, and should restore it to Brace and Thorne, they will make away with it, and you will never see anyone of them again.' ”

“If Van Hoeck is not the very old 'un hisself,” said the Judge, when I showed him this letter, “he's hand in hand with him.”

We asked Lola if she had recognized the man who dropped from the oriel window.

“No,” she replied, “the night was too thick; but he was about the size of the man I saw the night before going from one window to the other in the left-hand side of the house.”

One morning Brace said to me :

“I've had my suspicions on it for some time; but now I'm sure on it. *We're being watched.*”

I asked him what reason he had for this belief.

“My reason is this,” he replied. “The one-legged nigger as comes here for scraps give one of the house-helps harf-a-dollar this morning. It looked like he'd been buying up your silver spoons, so I jest had the rascal searched; but there warn't nairy thing on him but varmin. Lay your life, sir, that nigger didn't give harf-a-dollar for nothin'. We've got to keep our eyes open!”

“You think he is a spy, paying the helps for information with respect to our movements?” I said.



"I do—jest that."

"Why?"

"Why?" echoed Brace, drawing a long breath, "because it's jest three weeks since Van Hoeck learned that we are goin' to get back the Great Hesper, and he found an excuse for quittin' the locality of Monken Abbey."

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## CHAPTER XIX.

As the spring advanced, Brace turned his eyes daily to the mountain tops. On the first of May he said he would have a day or two off, and "jest have a look round at things."

On the seventh he returned.

"The time's come," he said; "the snow's goin' away sharp, and the rocks is already squittering down, but glory be, the hole's open. All we're got to pray for now is that the Kid 'll listen to the v'ice of reason. Leave her to me!"

As we were sitting at table he said, in a casual way:

"I was up to my old lot in Petersville for a bit of a refresher during my little holiday, sir; and you're no idea how nice the old place do look. Now, supposin'—as we ain't got nairy blessed thing to do for the next week, we kinder take a look around arter that stone we used ter think such a lot of—jest for curiosity like—hey? The Kid used ter make a fine to-do about bein' good when she was sick; do you feel like it now, my gel?"

Lola turned deadly pale, and was silent for a moment, then lifting her eyes to mine, she stretched her hand out, and, as I took it, said:

"I am ready."



We made our preparations that afternoon, and took the night train from San Diego to Canyon River, where we put up for the night. In the morning we took the stage to Great Canyon City—a deserted mining town at the foot of the Sierra. After lunching at the only hotel, we tried mules, and, leaving the valley, ascended the mountain path.

Water streamed freely down the mountain path upon the lower slopes; but our difficulties only commenced when we reached the line where the half-melted snow made the rocks treacherous even to the feet of the sure mules. We had four hours of terribly rough and dangerous travelling before we reached Petersville—the most wretched collection of rotten shanties I ever saw.

Not a living creature was to be seen; there was not a foot-mark in the slushy snow which still lay ankle deep upon the ground; it seemed completely abandoned. But the Judge led the way through the deserted rows of tumble-down huts, and presently pointed to one from which a column of blue smoke was ascending through the clear air.

We were on a plateau in the very heart of the mountains. All around the rugged peaks rose high into the still air, tinted with deep purple in the shadow, and the loveliest rose-pink where the sunlight fell upon the snow. Where the snow had slid away from the precipitous sides, the granite, streaming with water, glittered in the bright rays as if it were incrustated with jewels.

As we came to a halt, waiting for a response to Brace's call, the silence was broken by a prolonged roar like that of distant thunder, as some rock loosened by the frost broke away and hurtled down the unfathomed canyon.

A man came from the building, which still bore faint



trace of the word "Hotel" on its façade, and, greeting Brace with the air of an old acquaintance, said he had got everything aired, and a supper all ready to put down to the fire. Brace had seen the necessity of preparing him for our reception. A couple of rooms had been made as decently comfortable as might be expected. We left Lola there, and strolled out while the dinner was preparing.

The end of the town abutted upon a wide stream, that was tearing and whirling along among the gigantic boulders that marked its course, toward a black cleft which divided a towering mountain in two. Fantastic as are the effects which characterize the heights of the Sierra, I had seen nothing comparable to this. It was as if some mighty hand had split the mountain in half.

"I have know'd the time," said the Judge, impressively, "when both sides of this river was lined with miners, and every one on 'em worth his thousands of dollars!"

I had no sympathies with the past glories of the stream. My mind was filled with admiration of the savage beauty of the scenery around.

"Thar," said the Judge, flinging a piece of wood, part of an appliance which might have washed gold untold, into the turbid and rushing waters; "thar, bar stoppages, that'll pass the Great Hesper in less time than it will take us to get back to the hotel."

"Is it through that cleft we have to go?"

"Ah, sir, and down into the very innards of it."

I was looking toward the dark chasm with a feeling of awe, when Brace touched my elbow. He was dragging at his chin tuft, his lower lip protruding, his heavy brows bent. He pointed slowly to a trace in the snow.

"The man from the hotel been down here—is that what you mean?" I asked.



"It ain't him, sir, that mark. Look at it—it's a one-footed man! end," he added, striding forward and looking closer—"end it's a left-footed man! end it's a one wooden-legged man!" and then, with conviction, "It's the durned nigger that's been spyin' after us. Leave him to me. He ain't goin' to spy us to-morrow, not hef I knows it."

I approached the marks, and perceived that beside the foot was the round hole made by a wooden stump.

After dinner, Brace looked to the pine torches he had brought up, and spent the evening in drying them carefully, while chatting with the man of the hotel. He said not a word about our discovery, nor did the man speak of any visitor being in the house. This, with a certain cunning look in his little red eyes, alarmed me.

We were called at four o'clock the next morning, Brace saying that we must start early, in order to get our job done in time to get back to a comfortable dinner, but in reality, I believe, to preclude the possibility of being followed. When we had finished our breakfast, Brace, taking the hotel-man by the button, said:

"Old pal, you hev got a stranger stayin' in this house, I reckon."

The man scratched his ear, looked up and looked down, and then, at a jerk of his button, blinked up at Brace, and said:

"Waal, I allow I hev."

"A wooden-legged stranger, I think?"

The same shuffling, and then:

"Waal, I allow he hev got a wooden leg."

"A nigger, I believe."

"Waal, a nigger accordin' to appearances."

"I kinder fancy he's in the little chamber over there. 'Twarn't a swine I heard gruntin', were it?"



"You kin inspect him, if you like."

"I will; after which hef I take a fancy to nailin' of him up for four-and-twenty hours, for the same number o' dollars you will allow me the use of a hammer and some three-inch pints?"

"I will do that," said the man; and the two having shaken hands on the bargain, he went off to get the articles required, while Brace looked into the room.

"It's the same," said Brace, and turning up his sleeves, he proceeded to nail up the door in a business-like manner.

"I don't think he will trouble us, unless he kin afford to make it worth the old pal's while to let him out," said Brace, as we started from the house, "and even then he won't get much of a chance, seein' as no mortal man can get down that hole without a light, and we've got eyes for to see hef a light is follerin' on us."

It was dark, despite the snow that lay upon the ground. Brace led the way with a pine torch, which burned sluggishly in the mist that enveloped us. Lola holding my hand tightly, we followed close behind Brace, who kept the torch low to show the nature of the path, nevertheless we slipped and floundered considerably in stepping from boulder to boulder—the half-melted snow rendering it impossible to obtain a firm footing.

Under other circumstances, Lola would have enjoyed the difficulties, and laughed at our mishaps, but now she neither smiled nor spoke; sometimes she would press my hand a little tighter—that was all the sign she gave. We followed the course of the river, guided by the sound of the rushing waters. As we proceeded, the descent grew more and more rapid, the stream forming a long succession of falls, and, the light increasing, the rocks and bowl-



ders about us became visible through the gray mist. At length our progress was stopped by a huge rock that rose perpendicular before us.

"Hark!" said the Judge, as we stopped to regain the breath that had been pumped out of our lungs by the last scramble.

I listened—we seemed to have turned our backs on the stream—its rushing sounded more distant than I had yet heard it. I said this.

"*Hark again!*" said Brace. Then as I leaned my ear attentively, I heard beside the swirling and dashing noise in our rear a muffled roar, that seemed to come from the very bowels of the earth. I almost fancied I felt the rock vibrating under my feet.

"You're right," said Brace, when I gave him my impression; "end the roar you hear is that stream shootin' down thousands of feet to the bottom of the great hole. If it warn't for the durned mist," he added, holding up the torch, which revealed but a few feet above our heads of the granite wall by our side, "you'd see that we're now standin' right between the two sides of the divide we looked at last night. We air standin' right over the canyon, with per'aps four or five thousand feet of nothing under us, on a lump of rock that's tumbled down from up above, and wedged itself here, 'cause somethin' stopped its goin' further, end it do tremble, I allow. It ain't solid! It's moved a lump since I knew it in the old days, and one o' these days a chunk from up above will come down and start it off for good an' all."

"I think we may as well get off it, in that case."

"Wal, yes. It ain't more risky standin' on it than standin' under it; but as we've got to go under it, and down the hole, we may as well git."



He led the way along the trembling rock a dozen yards may be—the rushing water sounding upon the left of us,” and then stretched out his left arm to stop us. He advanced cautiously, and holding out the torch at arm’s length, the light fell upon the yellow water as it poured down into the black gulf upon which our standing place abutted. The flame of the torch was drawn down by the current of air as if it had been at the blast-hole of a furnace. Raising his voice to overcome the noise of the water, Brace called out:

“We’ve got to go down there!”

“You are not afraid, Lola?” I asked.

She shook her head, and gave my hand another little squeeze.

Brace led us off the rock, keeping the water still on our left, and there was some more downward clambering for a few minutes. Then we came to a stand, and he showed me a lateral opening about four feet in height.

“We goes through there,” he said, then he produced a flask, poured out a dram, and handed it to me. I offered it to Lola. Another shake of the head, and another little squeeze.

I emptied the cup, and Brace helped himself.

“There ain’t no need to get ourselves in a muck over this job. We’ll put our rubbers on,” he said, “the wet drips through.”

I took out the overcoats from the bundle of rugs, and we put them on. Then I strapped the roll of rugs on my shoulders again.

Brace touched my shoulder and pointed upward to a couple of faintly pink nebulous patches in the mist.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The sun ketchin’ the tops of the peaks,” he replied.



He took a couple of torches from the bundle he carried, and began to light them at the end of the one he had last used.

"Won't you wait a little—it will be light in half an hour?" I said.

"Not down there," he replied; "it's pitch dark at noon in that almighty hole. Now," he added, when the torches were well lit, "take one of these, kick the snow well off your feet, keep one eye on me, t'other on the rocks, and trust the rest to Providence."

With this last injunction he stooped down, and passed through the opening. We followed, but singly, for we needed both hands to make the perilous descent.

The first thing I noticed in passing under the great block that bridged the awful chasm was the comparative silence. We could no longer hear the rushing of the stream on the other side, only the dull roar of the water as it struck the bottom of the canyon some thousands of feet below.

Brace's voice was startlingly distinct when he spoke.

"You tell me the thing is on the other side of the ropes, my gel," he said.

She answered yes, and we went slowly forward and downward along the narrow and jagged ledge, our faces toward the glittering quartz, seeking interstices and projections for hold to our hands.

We were getting away from the fall, but at a certain point the natural path returned toward it in a zig-zag along a lower projection. At the angle which offered a little wider standing space, we stopped.

"This here hole was fust showed me by the Kid's mother," said Brace; "it had served her father for a cachette in quite the early days of this country's glory.



"A cachette," he explained, "is a place where you keep things snug. A'most every miner, before the Vigilance Committee nomenated me judge, had a cachette. This was mine, and many a ounce I've brought down here ; fur you see, barrin' accidents, it's won'erful safe. You will allow that no one could find his way down here in the dark" (I shuddered at the thought of anyone attempting such a fearful venture), "and from here right up to the hole is a fair straight line, so that no light could come down without its bein' seen ; but that ain't the only safeguard, as you shall see. Come on, sir."

We made our way foot by foot along the narrow ledge for some distance, still descending. When Brace again halted, the light of his torch revealed the yellow stream falling silently through space, a few feet before him. That silent fall impressed me with a sense of the awful depth of the gulf beside us.

The ledge ended abruptly where Brace stood ; a recess in the wall allowed ample standing room for us three.

"The greaser never got no further down than this ; but it weren't fur enough for me," said Brace. "I had my idea of gettin' right down to the bottom of this hole, where these waters must have carried tons o' gold."

"But the ledge ends here."

"It do ; but," he added, lifting his torch, "it goes on again over there."

The light fell on a jutting projection of quartz upon the opposite side of the chasm, distant at least twenty feet.

"But you cannot leap that."

"Correct, end I ain't goin' to try."

He laid himself upon his face, and stretched his arm down the chasm ; when he arose, he had a cord in his hand. Pulling this in, he drew up two coils of stout



rope. As he drew them in, I saw that their other ends were attached to rocks upon the opposite ledge, one above the other, with about four feet between.

"We must hitch 'em tight—give us a hand, sir," he said.

I helped him to make the ropes taut, and fasten their loose ends upon the projecting crags that he had long employed for that purpose.

"There, sir," he said, taking his torch from Lola, and holding it over the black gulf, "there's as pretty a bridge and hand-rail as the heart of man could reasonably desire."

For all that, I held my breath as I saw him step out on the lower rope, and make his way, holding by the upper one, across that black abyss. My turn came, and with the blood humming in my ears, I stepped out upon the rope. It swung to and fro in the middle, and I was seized with that irresistible suggestion of self-destruction which affects the imagination of most people in looking down from an extraordinary height.

Lola began to cross before I was well off, and when we stood all three in safety on the ledge, a fervent "Thank God!" rose from my heart.

"Wal, we've got to git back ag'in," observed Brace, as if my thankfulness were a little premature; "howsever, 'tain't bad to think of Providence when you're in danger; now, my gel, it's for you to lead on."

"You can stay here; you're too heavy for where I'm going," said she, taking the torch from his hand.

With a swiftness that terrified me, she went down the side of the precipice, finding foothold where we, looking down from the projection, could see none.

"They don't know danger—kids don't," said Brace, in



a low tone. "End," he added, looking into the depths about him uneasily, "I wouldn't mind feeling the same myself. First time I ever felt skeery down this hole, and I'm durned if it shan't be the last. I'm gettin' too old to enj'y risky work."

I could not take my eyes from the light below, as it passed in jerks from point to point. At last it stopped, and after a minute's pause, to my great relief, it began to return.

Quicker and quicker the light danced along until I felt sick and giddy with fear for the girl's safety; and then, with one last bound, she stood upon our shelf of rock, holding the Great Hesper in her hand.

"Am I good?" she asked, earnestly, nestling up to my side.

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## CHAPTER XX.

"It's the very same," said Brace, taking the stone in his hand.

"Do you take care of it," said I, "for I find enough to do to take care of myself."

"Wal, I reckon it won't be long afore we're on the best side o' this hole," he replied, putting the stone in his pocket.

He was certainly ill at ease and less confident than usual, for he took his torch and examined the fastenings of the ropes, and then from an adjacent cavity he brought out another coil of cord, in which cross-pieces of stout hickory were knotted at intervals of a foot. He unfastened it and laid it loose upon the rock, with the looped end free.

"The ropes has been years exposed to the damp, and they're bound to go one day. Hef they should happen to



go this day, this here knotted rope may come in partic'lar handy. You know how to use it, my gel. Here's for a start."

With the torch in his hand he began the return along the rope.

He had got to the middle when he stopped.

"What's that?" he asked sharply, holding the upper rope with one hand, while he raised the torch with the other, and peered out into the darkness.

It was fearful to see him standing there with the upheld torch over the awful chasm, the one luminous object in the blackness.

"Did you hear anything, pardner?"

"No."

"Seemed to me I heered a rifle cocked. Durned old fool!" he muttered in self-reproach, as he continued his course.

Without accident, or other incident, he reached the ledge, and with a grunt of content seated himself on a boulder, letting the torch drop by his side. There was a pool of water there; with a hiss the light went out.

The next instant there was a flash in the darkness beyond, followed by the sharp crack of a rifle shot.

We could see nothing, but from the ledge opposite came a groan, and Brace called faintly:

"I'm hit, pardner; look out for yourself."

The shot had been fired after the light was extinguished, leaving him in obscurity. The faculty that had enabled the assassin to descend that terrible ledge in the dark had enabled him to mark down poor Brace, when he was no longer visible to our eyes.

This reflection struck me as, torch in hand, I sprung upon the rope bridge to cross to my fallen partner.



"Back, pardner, back," groaned Brace; "he's got the Hesper, and he'll have your life—back!"

I raised my torch, and looking toward the ledge, I saw a man kneeling over Brace.

He raised his arm to silence Brace, and the light fell on the bright blade of the knife in his hand. I shouted. Turning, he saw me midway across the chasm, and sprung to his feet. Then I recognized him. It was Van Hoeck.

It was he, but could I believe my senses? His eyes were not the same. At that distance his sightless eyes should have been hardly distinguishable from his cadaverous face, but now they shone out black and lustrous. Yet in that instant, as he looked toward me, they seemed to fade away in the light of my torch. And this was no deception of my sight.

With a savage cry of rage he held up his arms to shield his eyes from the light, and, grasping his knife, he made his way quickly toward the rock to which the rope on which I stood was attached.

In a moment the whole mystery was revealed. *He was a Nyctalops*, and his eyes, blind in the light, were gifted with the extraordinary power of seeing in the dark—a power by which was explained all that had hitherto been inscrutable in the robbery of the Great Hesper and the attendant events at Monken Abbey.

With a perception that he intended to cut the rope which sustained me, I hastened to reach the ledge on which he stood. But my progress was necessarily slow, for the lower cord, stretched with the weight upon it, formed a deep bend, and my damp boots slipped upon its wet surface.

Which would he cut first? If it were the upper one, I must trust to catching the lower as I fell. With this view,



I kept myself as perpendicular as circumstances permitted ; at the same time grasping the upper one with all my force, in case he cut the lower one.

I was within a yard of the rock when I felt the rope under my foot jerk as Van Hoeck cut through the first strands ; the next instant it went altogether, and I was left swinging by my hands to the upper rope over the chasm.

“Die ! cursed dog, die !” shouted Van Hoeck, with the frantic excitement of a man achieving at last the object of his life, as he attacked the upper rope with his knife. “Die, and know that all you cherish in the world shall be mine—wealth, and the woman you love. Die !”

And with that he severed the last strand, and I swept down through space. Clinging with desperate energy to the rope in my hands, I swung, cramping myself together in anticipation of a violent shock against the side of the precipice. Happily, the rock above projected a little, so that the blow was less severe than I expected. I rebounded, and swung to and fro like a pendulum in the pitchy darkness. For, in order to get a firmer grasp upon the rope when I saw his intention of cutting it, I had dropped the torch, which fell like the spark of a rocket into the depths below.

What was I to do ? I dared not try to pull myself hand over hand up the wet rope, for the slightest relaxation of my hold might allow the rope to slip, and I should be lost assuredly.

“Dear, are you there still ?” Lola called from above.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Here is the rope—when I call, you can trust yourself to it.”

At the same time I felt the knotted rope dangling against my shoulders.



"Now," she called.

It was not an instant too soon. I felt the wet rope slipping through my hands. Leaving go with one hand, I clutched out wildly for the knotted rope, and by the happiest chance succeeded in seizing it.

I got a cross-piece between my feet, and I was comparatively safe, if Lola had strength to hold on for a few moments. But that I might not tax her too greatly, I still grasped the wet rope.

"Saved," I called out to her.

"Not for long," shouted Van Hoeck, from the opposite side, and I heard the snap of the spring as he closed the breech-loader, and then the "click" as he cocked the piece.

Would he shoot me or the girl? I asked myself in that moment.

He fired, and the ringing shot was followed by a sharp cry of pain from above, and the cross-piece on which I stood gave a little jerk, but no more. She must have escaped, despite that cry, or she could not still have held on to the rope.

But terrible as these thoughts that passed through my mind in those brief moments were, they were banished from my mind by a yet more terrific appeal to my senses.

Following almost immediately upon the crack of the rifle and Lola's cry, a mass of rock, probably disintegrated by the frost, and started from its place by the reverberation of the shot, slid down the face of the precipice, hurtled against a rock, and some moments after fell with a deep "pong" into the water below.

But as if this had been the key-stone of the fabric that upheld the mighty weight of the enormous rock that covered the chasm, its fall was followed by the crumbling away and precipitation of others at intervals rapidly de-



creasing, their fall eventually becoming a continued down-pour, marked now and then by a louder crash as some larger block gave way.

The roar of artillery, the peal of thunder, was not to be compared with the awful din as the great rock jerked downward, as the quartz splintered and gave way under it, shattering and grinding the opposing rocks, and bursting away huge fragments that struck from side to side as they hurtled down, tearing and splitting the very heart of the mountain as it seemed.

The fall was most violent at some distance away from us further down the ravine; only an occasional block, ground under the great mass as it jerked down, was shattered to pieces, and fell in dust and rubble about us.

But our turn was at hand.

It seemed to me as if the last day had come, and the world were crumbling to pieces. To the terror of an earthquake was added the horror of impenetrable darkness, and the consciousness that the gigantic rock that vaulted the abyss was slowly jerking down upon us. I must have kept my hold upon the rock by instinct; I had no consciousness of volition.

The awful eruption had continued for some moments—scarcely so long as one might take to read this description—with increasing intensity, when suddenly, with an appalling crash, the great roof tilted up. I saw the earth slowly gape open above me, letting in the blinding sunlight; and then the upper lip of jagged rock reaching its highest elevation shot sidelong away, making visible the long strip of blue heaven between the towering peaks of the mountain.

One last “pong,” as the rock wedged itself afresh lower down the precipice, and then all was still. The sight of



the blue sky, the sense of relief, were too much for me. I trembled violently, and for a moment I thought I must relinquish my hold. But a piteous cry from Lola nerved me to fresh effort.

I saw now the two cut ropes, and, grasping one in each hand, I drew myself up, using the knotted rope as slightly as I could ; and so presently I scrambled upon the ledge.

Lola was lying upon the ground drawn against the rock round which she had passed the knotted cord. The ball had struck her and she had fallen, but the devoted girl had passed the noose round her body, and so saved my life for the second time. I knelt beside her, and raised her head. She opened her beautiful eyes and smiled, as she took my hand. She could do no more.

---

## CHAPTER XXI.

“ I KNOWED it must go one day. How fares it, pardner ? ” called Brace from the opposite ledge.

Looking across, I saw him sitting on the boulder binding his arm with his neckcloth.

“ Lola is hit. The villain has done his work, ” I said.

“ He'll never do no more, ” Brace answered, pointing up the ledge.

Van Hoeck had tried to escape the way he came, after shooting Lola, and had got some distance along the ledge when the great rock opened and slid away.

He stood on the narrow path now—a ghastly spectacle. A piece of quartz had struck him on the head ; a thin stream of blood was trickling down his cheek. In one hand he held the Great Hesper ; in the other he grasped his rifle.



But he dared not move from the position he had reached when the roof tilted up ; for the light that burst in had blinded him once more. The sensitive retina had closed over the pupils, and the blank, sightless eyes stared wildly round, incapable of seeing.

It was possible for Brace to reach him by going along the ledge.

“ Will you save him ? ” I asked.

“ Not I, pardner,” he replied. “ I leave him to Providence, be his end what it may. The shot he fired at my poor youngster started the consarn, and brought the whole thing down. ’Tis God Almighty’s judgment. Let it be.”

Van Hoeck let the rifle slip from his hand ; how insignificant to us seemed the sound that came up from below, as the weapon struck a rock, after the mighty discord that had thundered in our ears, and yet to him how terribly significant !

We could see his hand quivering as he groped along the edge of the wall.

In vain now he strained his eyes to see the ledge by which he had followed us. Yet he could not stand forever there.

He found a crevice for his fingers, and made a step forward ; he advanced again, but the rock he put his foot on was a piece of the *débris* that had fallen upon the ledge. It rolled under his weight. He staggered back, swinging his arms in the vain attempt to get an equilibrium, then he shot forward, and fell headlong down, down, down into the abyss.

I held my breath ; it seemed minutes before that hollow “ pong ” reached our ears, telling us that Van Hoeck was gone forever, and the Great Hesper with him.

. . . . .



There was cord, and to spare, in the coils. Weighting one end with a stone, I threw an end across to Brace, and when the cut ropes were knotted, and a bridge once more formed, he crossed, and knelt down by me over poor Lola.

He examined her wound, and shook his head in silence : there was no hope.

We made a mattress of the rugs on the smoothest part of the rock and attempted to lift her upon it. But the movement gave her pain, and she motioned us to desist. Then pointing upward, she made signs for us to leave her.

“Not while you are with us, my poor gel,” said her father, with more tenderness than I had ever heard in his voice.

We had the flask, and some food in a wallet. We eat when we were hungry, seated beside Lola.

Then exhausted with fatigue, and the terrible strain we had been subjected to, we unconsciously fell asleep, with our backs resting against the rock. The last thing of which I was conscious was the pressing of Lola’s lips upon my hand.

. . . . .  
Brace touched my arm.

“Pardner,” he said, in a tone of awe, “The Kid’s gone.”

I looked where I had seen her lying with her face to my hand. She was gone literally. There was a little stain of blood upon the rock—a drop further on, another close to the edge of the platform. She had kept her promise—she had been good ; and now the sufferings of her short life were ended.

“She knowed it was no good our waitin’—poor little cuss.”

I felt something in my hand ; opening it, I found a ring



I had bought for Lola. She had slipped it there before she went.

. . . . .

Sir Edmund and Edith came to San Diego in June, the loveliest season of that lovely land. The air from the sea tempered the sun's heat. The plantations were already burdened with fruit, everywhere there was a redolence of orange-blossom—"a very suggestive fragrance, my dear fellow," said the baronet, pressing my hand.

Edith was charmed with all she saw.

"Is this my home?" she asked.

I turned to Sir Edmund.

"Well, we must go through the formality of looking at the books, my dear," said he.

I had no hesitation in showing them, and when he had seen the splendid results they already showed, he formally sanctioned a renewal of our engagement; but we had not waited for that consent to let our hearts join in unconstrained delight.

Our second engagement was happily longer than the first, but we were married the week after the vines were cleared.

Brace was at our wedding breakfast. When it was over, he took some of the flowers from the table, and disappeared for some days. I knew how he had spent the brief holiday. If I had entertained any doubt, it would have been dispelled when, on his return, he took the old agreement from his pocket and pointed to the postscript:

"It is understood between the above partners that, in the event of a lucky find, the Kid shall not be forgotten."

And, indeed, in my wife I had found a dearer prize than any I had dreamed of when I signed the compact.

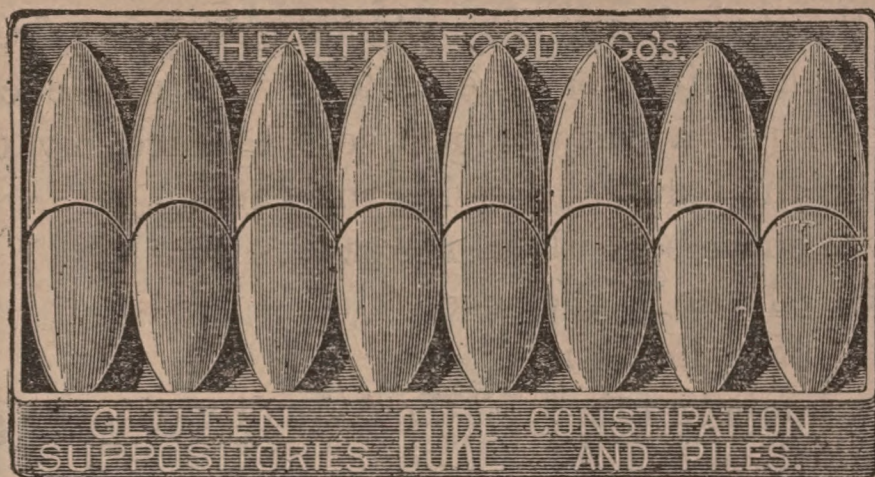


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
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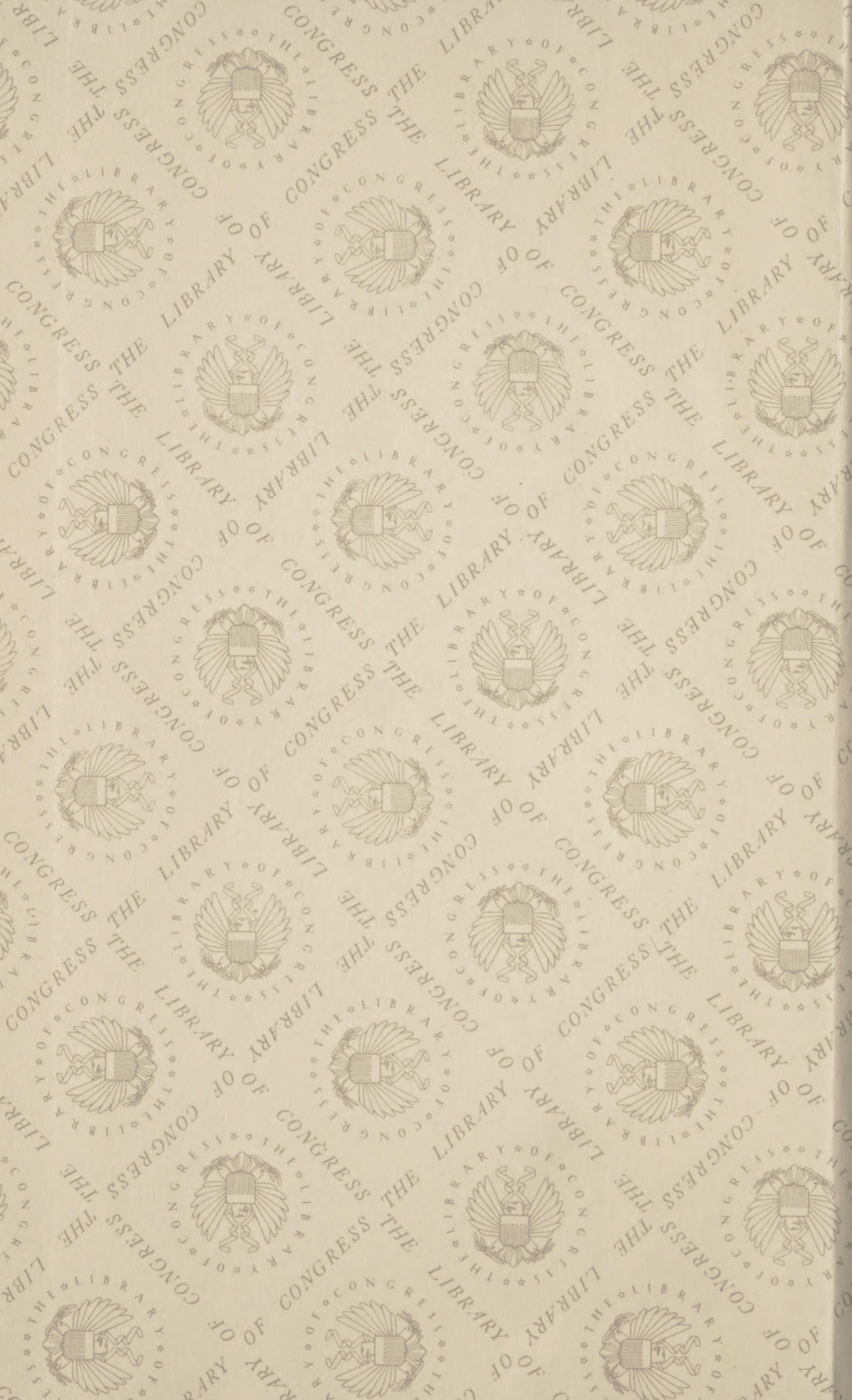




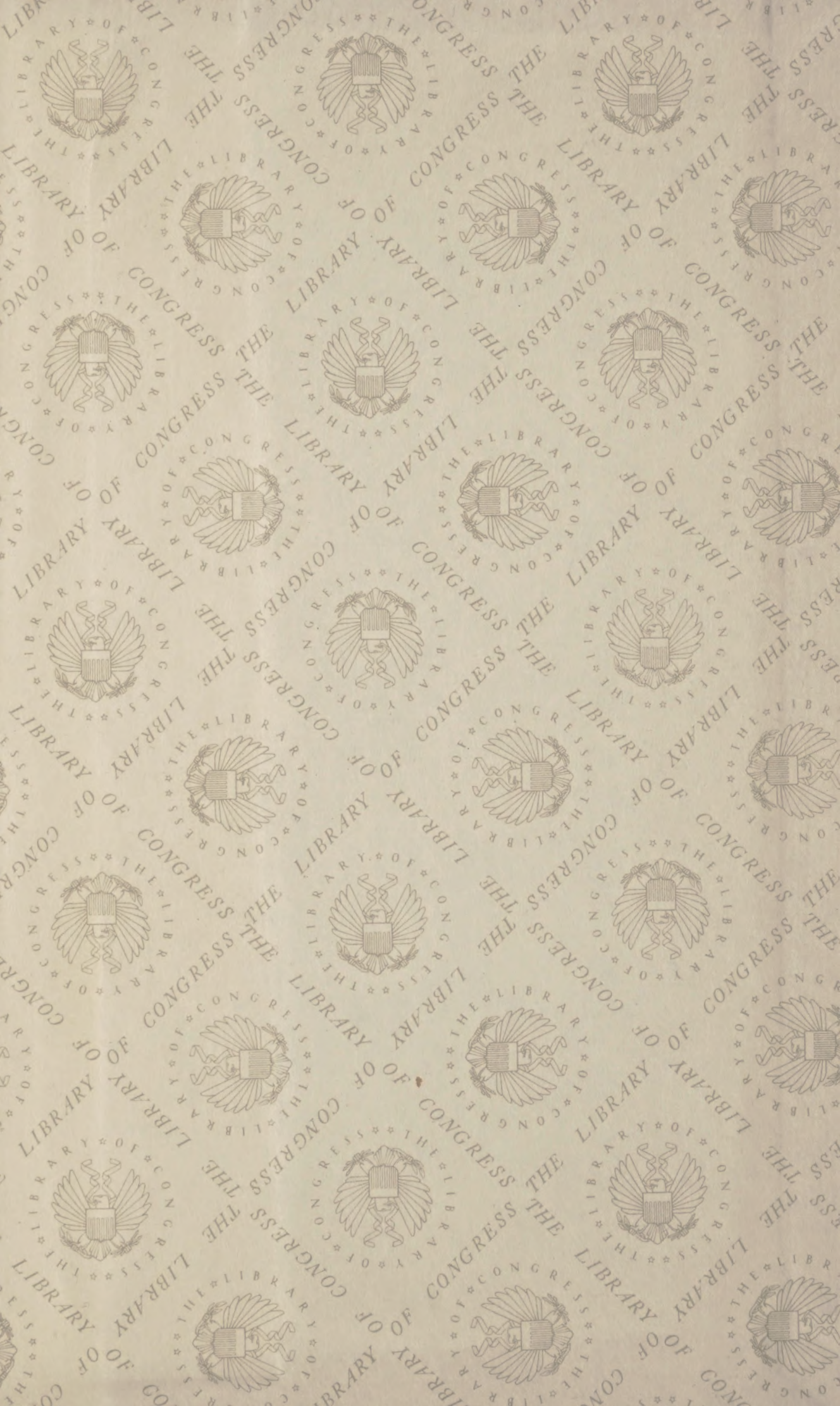






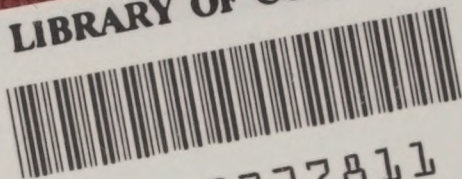








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